“The Cuban, As the Mexican, Stands Alone”:

American tourism in Cuba and Mexico in the 1920s and 1950s

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Abstract

It may at times be difficult to distinguish between Panamanian, Hondruan, Ecuadoran, Costa Rican or Venezuelan, but the Cuban, as the Mexican, stands alone.
-Basil Woon, *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba*

At the end of each of the World Wars, the American economy experienced boosts which created the financial capability for higher standards of living, more consumer products, and, perhaps most relevantly, leisure. International travel was a practice once reserved for the upper echelons of society, but in the post-war eras, the widening middle class with newfound disposable income wanted a piece of the action. The proliferation of tourism industries at first seems to be mutually beneficial for hosts and guests alike: a way to enrich a country through the creation of a new profitable industry, and the provision of cultural experiences, relaxation, and thrills for its guests. However, as put by the authors of *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*, "even with goodwill on both sides the meeting of these two groups is bound to cause friction, exacerbated by historical inequalities."[1]As in the case of the growth of American tourism in Latin America, this friction manifested as issues over how to represent the host country's history, culture and people to visitors who may stay for just a weekend, how to appeal to American interest without sacrificing or simplifying the understanding of said country, and ultimately, how to navigate this unique type of trade that is intercultural, financial, diplomatic, occasionally antagonistic, and perhaps systemically inauthentic and unethical.

This thesis compares the tourism industries in Cuba and Mexico, specifically focusing on the decades following World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945). Tourism in both countries got their start for the same reason: the implementation of Prohibition in the United

[1] Kinnaird, Vivian, and Derek R. Hall. *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*. Chichester; Wiley, 1994. (115)

States in 1919, motivating many Americans to cross the border into Tijuana or sail over to Havana in order to obtain alcohol. Both destinations initially lured tourists with liquor, but had very different strategies for getting tourists to return. Mexico's tourism industry by no means had the same meteoric rise that Cuba did, but Mexico's slower, planned growth created space for the expansion of tourism into many regions of Mexico and the establishment of many different types of tourism: historical, archaeological, and of course, leisure and pleasure. Havana's immediate popularity and creation of its mythos as a pleasure-seeker's paradise, combined with Cuba's more recent independence and complicated relationship with the United States, created an industry that focused primarily on pleasing Americans.

This thesis evaluates several aspects of the tourism industries in Mexico and Cuba throughout the 1920s and 1950s, including the construction of infrastructure and accomodations, transportation, marketing, journalism, and the promotion and availability of different tourism experiences. While tourism occurred before, in-between, and after the 1920s and 1950s, I have decided to focus on these eras due to the explosion of tourism at the end of each World War, fueled by post-war economic booms in the United States. This thesis is not meant to be an exhaustive recap of all aspects of these tourism industries, instead, it zooms in on the areas that were most consequential for the construction of the American gaze and tourist experience in these countries.

Cuba and Mexico's tourism industries developed very differently due to the decisions of a few leaders which dealt with balancing autonomy with creating interest for American audiences. Mexico maintained cultural autonomy through pacing the growth of their tourism industry, putting special attention into incorporating historical and cultural experiences into the

industry beyond nightlife and pleasure. The case of Cuba is slightly more tragic: informed by Cuba's struggle for independence, the country was always compelled to make choices that more immediately kept them in the good graces of the United States, but in the process made concessions to how Americans evaluated their culture, their history, and their character (often derogatorily). Ultimately, it was the acceptance of Mexican nationalism as part of the tourist product and experience and the repression of nationalism in Cuba in favor of promoting tourism that created these divergent experiences in these countries for both residents and American tourists.

Methodology/Literature Review

This project considers both primary and secondary sources, from collections of essays, *New York Times* articles, dissertations, and travel guides, namely *Cuba and Mexico On Your Own!* written by Tana de Gamez and Arthur R. Pastore and published in 1954 by Cortina Language Guides, as well as *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba*, published in 1928 by travel writer Basil Woon. *Cuba and Mexico On Your Own!* is a vocabulary and language guide, combined with chapters on the history of these countries, travel recommendations and other tips for making the most of your stay in Cuba or Mexico.[2] Basil Woon was described in his *1974 New York Times* obituary as "a correspondent in Paris, a publicity man for Cuba, and a ghost writer for Peggy Hopkins Joyce."[3] His depiction of Havana in 1928 is certainly less objective than the Cortina Language Guides, but adds texture and perspective to the perceptions Americans had of Cuba at this time. Beyond these travel guides, many articles were pulled from the *New York Times*

[2]TERRY, C. V. "At Home And Abroad." *New York Times*, May 9, 1954, sec. book review.
[3]"BASIL WOON, 80 JOURNALIST, DIES - The New York Times." Accessed April 14, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/05/archives/basil-woon-80-journalist-dies-career-spanned-60-years-here-and.html.

archive, such as announcements of major events, as well as reactions from American tourists visiting Cuba and Mexico.

This paper features a long section on Fulgencio Batista, the President of Cuba throughout the golden age of tourism in the 1950s, and perhaps the second most emblematic Cuban leader behind Fidel Castro. This section is owed to the brilliant work done in Frank Argote-Freyre's *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of a Dictator,* a full recounting of Batista's life, rise to power, and stories behind his actions, including many transcripts of conversations, memos, and lesser-known Batista anecdotes. Argote-Freyre's work explained Batista's unique motivations in the building of Cuba's tourism industry and how his previous experiences with leadership and Americans compelled him to cater to American desire and interest. Discussions of Batista in this thesis are not meant to excuse any of his actions, and are instead meant to demonstrate how Cuba's unique history with the United States consistently put Cuban leaders in the position to either prioritize Cuban citizens or face the wrath of the Yankees, and that Batista's actions have much more nuance than most initially see.

Dina Berger is the primary scholar in the area of American tourism in Mexico, and her book *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry: Pyramids by Day, Martinis By Night* as well as her essays found in collections like *Holiday in Mexico: Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters* are referenced frequently throughout this thesis. I also pulled much from the work of Dennis Merill, who wrote *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America,* which features two chapters each on Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico throughout different decades. This is the only secondary source I found that compares Mexico and Cuba directly in this context, but due to the inclusion of the Puerto Rico chapters, Merill does not give his exact analysis on how Cuba and Mexico alone compare. I

came across other texts that compared Cuba with other tourist destinations, like *Economies of Desire: sex and tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic* by Amalia L. Cabezas as well as *The Purpose of Paradise: U.S. tourism and empire in Cuba and Hawai'i* by Christine Skwiot. Cabezas, Skiwot as well as Dennis Merill analyze the relationship between the United States and Cuba (as well as the Dominican Republic and Hawaii, respectively) in the nineteenth century as explicitly colonial and exploitative, specifically in the realm of the "pleasure economy", meaning drugs, sex, and partying. This thesis adopts this analysis of the relationship between the United States and Cuba as colonial, even if not officially recognized as such, and pulls many examples utilized in these texts to show how exploitative behavior by American tourists in the realm of pleasure played into the tourist experience in Cuba.

I believe this field of research needs a direct comparison of Cuba and Mexico's tourism industries due to their inherent similarities, yet divergent development of their tourism industries, as well as the fact that Mexico and Cuba seem to hold a different, more familiar place in the American consciousness, standing out from the rest of Latin America, as reflected in the quote at the beginning of the abstract. This quote, beyond demonstrating how Americans perceived a distinctiveness of Cuba and Mexico, illuminates how the development of their tourism industries set them apart from each other as well. Cuba stands alone, as the country whose tourism turned its capital city into an American playground, as does Mexico, for its perceived versatility by foreign audiences, likely due to the variety showcased in its tourism industry. The first chapter considers tourism industries in Mexico and Cuba immediately after the First World War (1914-1918) and the implementation of Prohibition, and how each country responded to the new market of Americans seeking libations. The second chapter zooms in on Mexico's tourism industry in the 1950s, considering key leadership decisions with lasting impacts, the proliferation

of “sun and sand” tourism, and the questions surrounding authentic cultural expression throughout the Indigenismo movement. The third chapter covers Cuba’s tourism industry throughout the 1950s, with special attention given to Batista’s presidency, the propagation of Havana as an “American playground”, and the complicated tourism-combination-permanent residency of Americans at Guantánamo Bay.

Introduction

An American recounting of Cuban history frames themselves as the savior in a long struggle between Cuba and Spain. Cuba remained under Spanish colonial rule for hundreds of years until the Cuban Wars of Independence began in 1868. Seeing Cuba's war with Spain as convenient for their plans to have Cuba under American dominion, the United States declared war on Spain, fought in conjunction with Cubans, and won. However, the Cuban Independence Movement has been overshadowed in the Western-centric historical narrative, seen merely as a footnote in recounting the Spanish-American War: an all-out battle between two Western countries over the protection of democracy, or rather, the property of Cuba. Famed Cuban poet Jose Martí reflected in his prose the knowledge that Spanish occupation would end once Americans joined the Cuban Wars of Independence. Forebodingly, Marti remarked at the poem's end: "Once the United States is in Cuba…who will drive it out?" [4]

The war-end agreement, The Treaty of Paris, was signed in 1898 by representatives from the United States and Spain; Cuba was left out of treaty negotiations. Spain was to withdraw from Cuba completely, and the United States would establish a "temporary" presence by installing American representatives in Havana and a military base at Guantánamo Bay. The U.S. reserved the right to intervene in any situation they deemed threatening to Cuban democracy, and Cuba was to have limited interactions with other countries.[5] The United States "saved" Cuba from Spain, only to make Cuba entirely dependent on interaction and economic stimulation from the United States, in the same way a colony relied on its governing power. This reveals a trend

[4] Holt, Lauren Elizabeth. "The Costs of Cuba Libre: U.S. Neo-Imperialism, Tourism in Cuba, and the Habana Hilton." M.A., The University of Mississippi, 2015. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1759041706/abstract/C4EE7137FFF24913PQ/1. (13)

[5] "Avalon Project - Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain; December 10, 1898." Accessed April 14, 2025. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp.

for the United States: hiding their true motivation for control and power under the guise of leadership and protection; the United States joined Cuba's plight with Spain to end colonialism there, and yet, a power dynamic rooted in colonialism remained in Cuba, this time around, under a much more robust and must closer country.

While Cuba's relationship with the United States could be described more so as an alliance that turned quasi-colonial, the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is based upon their differences and their history of conflict. Cuba's territory is off the coast of the continental United States, while Mexico and the United states share soil, and faced many territory disputes that erupted in the Mexican-American War between 1846 and 1848. The war ended with much more favorable terms for the United States, with Mexico ceding a large part of what is now the western United States. This loss of territory and tragedy of the war soured relations between the United States and Mexico, pushing them in much different directions as the twentieth century began.

Mexico garnered a reputation within the United States as dangerous, backwards, and incapable of progress. That did not necessarily prevent Americans from traveling there, as a few travel writers depicted their travels to Mexico as if they were cowboys in the Wild West, communicating with strange locals and traveling down unmarked paths. American influence built back up in Mexico, as United States foreign policy up until this point had emphasized the belief that American intervention was not only necessary and desired by these foreign countries, but also an inevitable part of the United States accepting its role as a superpower. As H.L. Mencken wrote in the *New York World*, "If anything is plain in the world… it is that the United

States is gradually sweeping the weaker republics of the southward into its net… We can no more escape taking Mexico, sooner or later, than we could escape taking California." [6]

However, moving into the twentieth century, "Big Stick" foreign Policy was replaced with Good Neighbor Diplomacy; militarial and diplomatic means of navigating foreign relationships with the United States shifted towards trade, "friendship" and, yes, tourism. While Cuba began its first tourism boom with the immediate goal of charming the American audience, Mexico stood alone, and navigated new territory when deciding when to endear the American audience, and when to maintain distance and acknowledge the trauma caused by the Yankees just a century prior.

[6] Merrill, Dennis. "Lone Eaġles and Revolutíonaríes: The U.S.-Mexican Rapprochement of the 1920s." In *Negotiating Paradise*, 29–64. U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America. University of North Carolina Press, 2009. https://doi.org/10.5149/9780807898635_merrill.5. (35)

CHAPTER 1:
Prohibition, "A Bundle of Lace", and the Construction of Culture:
Cuba and Mexico in The First Tourism Boom
1919-1930

I. Introduction: Prohibition as Catalyst

The Eighteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution was ratified on January 16th, 1919, prohibiting the manufacturing, transportation, and sale of alcohol in the United States. Prohibition was the culmination of decades of protest by Temperance groups who saw alcohol consumption as societal poison and big business bosses looking to create a more productive workforce. Today, Prohibition is viewed with a sense of irony due to the rise of organized crime and the success of bootlegging in the era. However, Prohibition was very popular in its time. The Prohibition amendment was ratified nationwide within two years of its initial approval from the United States Congress, receiving approval from 46 out of the 48 states at the time, proportionately more support than any previous amendment.[7]

While Prohibition was primarily meant to increase worker productivity in the United States, it also served to situate the country on moral high ground. Drinking alcohol in 1920s America was considered uncouth, and carried an association with drunk debauchery and other elements of "saloon culture". In a piece for the *Journal of Social History*, J.C. Burnham wrote about the public perception of men in saloons: "Respectable men were careful in or about a saloon. The saloon was for the most part a noxious institution, in fact inextricably bound up with prostitution, gambling, police corruption, and crime…most saloons were disreputable places." [8]

[7]Schwartz, Richard. "Prohibition, 1920 to 1933: An Overview of Its Effects on Public Health and the Economy." *Southern Medical Journal* Volume 85, no. 4 (April 1992): 397–402.
[8]Burnham, J. C. "New Perspectives on the Prohibition 'Experiment' of the 1920's." *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 1 (1968): 51–68.

And yet, the banning of alcohol, and thus, the ending of business for American saloons, did not eliminate the desire to drink, indulge, or exhibit the type of bad behavior associated with alcohol consumption. Throughout the 1920s, alcohol was illegally smuggled into the country, primarily by way of Canada, Cuba, and the Bahamas. While these bootlegging industries were setting up shop, Americans searching for a more immediate solution looked to their nearby neighbors, primarily Cuba and Mexico, for legal booze.

Beyond its legality, drinking on foreign soil had a unique appeal. In an era where the United States clung to its self-appointed superiority, Americans were criticized for seeking reprieve or letting loose in their hometowns. Lacking the same accountability in Cuba or Mexico, American tourists often went to these places to drink heavily, gamble, and seek out other means of fulfilling their desires in places they felt this behavior to be more acceptable. Cuba and Mexico experienced their first big tourism boom in the 1920s for this reason.

II. Cuba in the 1920s

"Everybody's going there this year
And there's a reason
The season opened last July
Ever since the U.S.A. went dry
Everybody's going there and I'm going too
—
With so much scotch and rye on the table
I'll drink 'til I won't be able to see you in C-U-B-A"

-Irving Berlin, "I'll See You In Cuba" [9]

Beyond Cuba's adjacency to the continental United States, its longstanding obligation to respond to American needs and markets made Cuba the ideal location for American tourism in the Prohibition Period. The Platt Amendment, a safeguard implemented after the Spanish-American War, allowed the United States to intervene in Cuban affairs whenever they

[9]Berlin, Irving. *I'll See You In Cuba*. 1920. Song.

saw fit. This created a nearly-colonial relationship designed to make Cuba responsive to the demands of the United States. As the country bounced from one colonial power to another, little space was carved out for Cuban agency or national identity.

The United States primarily imported sugar from Cuba before the 1920s, utilizing their influence over Cuba to give themselves favorable trade rates. The United States government invested in Cuban sugar plantations as if they were their own, or at the very least, under the presumption that Cuban industries were specifically making products for American buyers. American investors aided the construction of twenty-five new sugar mills in Cuba between 1914 and 1920.[10] When the United States began to see tourism as a more intriguing Cuban product than sugar, American companies jumped at the chance to invest in the modernization of Cuba, seeing it as a way to build Cuba up in a way that most catered to Americans. Feeling obligated to please the United States, President Geraldo Machado selected the Warren Brothers of Boston as the contractors for a new central highway in Cuba, ignoring eight Cuban candidates.[11] Instead of economic nationalism, Cuban leaders often accepted American investment. They worked closely with American businesses, seeing Americans as their primary clientele, to ensure that tourists remained interested and invested in the Cuban tourism industry.

Anticipating a rush of American visitors once Prohibition went into full effect, the Cuban government created the National Commission for the Promotion of Tourism in 1919.[12] Seeing that Americans would be crossing the border primarily for alcohol, the initial goal of Cuban hotels was to make their guests feel right at home, as if alcohol had never been banned in the

[10]Bronfman, Alejandra. *Isles of Noise: Sonic Media in the Caribbean*. University of North Carolina Press, 2016. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469628707_bronfman. (37)
[11]Schwartz, Rosalie. *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. (17)
[12]Salinas, Eros, Lluis Mundet, and Eduardo Salinas. "Historical Evolution and Spatial Development of Tourism in Cuba, 1919–2017: What Is Next?" *Tourism Planning and Development* 15, no. 3. Accessed April 14, 2025. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21568316.2018.1427142.

States. For this reason, American elements of hotels in Havana were highlighted in advertisements; Hotel Simnole advertised their restaurant as a "first-class American café," a newly-constructed Ritz Hotel promoted their American management staff, and the Clifton House prided themselves in "making a specialty of American home cooking and baking" in Havana. Names of many hotels built in the 1920s referenced American cities and states: the Hotel Chicago, Hotel Pennsylvania, Hotel Manhattan, and Hotel Ohio, positioning these accommodations as American by proxy.[13] Ultimately, 1920s American tourism in Cuba "depended less on the allure of things foreign than on the availability of things familiar." [14]

Cuba was marketed as a place where Americans could live out a fuller extension of their personal liberty, as Cuba extended freedom to alcohol consumption. A 1921 travel review of Cuba described it as an "ideal country of personal liberty ... .we should bring with us the Statue of Liberty, to place in the port of Havana, where it properly belongs."[15] The concept of personal liberty in the Cuban tourism experience appears again in the guidebook *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba* by British-American travel writer Basil Woon. Woon sarcastically touted "that personal liberty in Cuba may be interpreted as meaning: 1. You may drink as much as you want to; 2. You may buy as many drinks for your friends as you wish; 3. You may chance your luck at the lottery; 4. You may lose as much money as you desire in the Casino." [16] Woon followed this up by saying that "every restaurant and nearly every grocery is a barroom," cementing the availability of alcohol in Cuba in the American mind.[17] Beyond availability, Woon hedges a specific characterization of drinking culture in Havana: "It is never mañana when it comes to

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[13] Pérez, Louis A. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. 4th ed. Latin American Histories. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. (169-171)
[14] Pérez (168)
[15] Ferrer, Ada. *Cuba (Winner of the Pulitzer Prize): An American History*. New York, UNITED STATES: Scribner, 2021. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tufts-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6687590. (175)
[16] Woon, Basil. *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba*. Horace Liveright, 1928. (10)
[17] Woon (30)

drinking in Havana. You need never put off until tomorrow the drinks that should cool you today".[18] Woon's words not only encouraged readers to never put off ordering another drink in Havana, but made that behavior seem customary in the city. This specialization of the Cuban tourism industry on alcohol worked at the moment: it was lucrative, exciting, and successful.

Tourists often found themselves in one of the 7,000 bars stationed in Havana in the 1920s, some of which were owned by Americans. Part of the mythology of the Havana bar scene was an infiltration of American bartenders who were suddenly out of work in the States. Some said it was nearly impossible to find a Cuban or Spanish bartender at any establishment in Havana.[19] Basil Woon recommended the American tourist-dominated Sloppy Joe's bar, which had "really little Cuban about it," as well as the Winter Garden Bar and Dono-van's, both of which were originally establishments in New York City and Newark respectively, but were packed up and relocated to Havana after the passing of Prohibition. [20]

The most popular liquor in Havana was rum – specifically Bacardí rum, which had been produced since the mid-1800s in Santiago de Cuba. Tourists began visiting Santiago de Cuba to visit the Bacardí factory. Bacardí, as well as its offshoot Hatuey Beer, were so popular and emblematic of Cuba in the 1920s that the Bacardí family sought to further their presence in Havana, building the now-famous Bacardí Building, which was completed in 1930.[21] Apart from rum, Cuba was famous for its cocktails, which gained popularity during Prohibition due to the small availability of quality alcohol, thus needing to drown out the taste with stronger flavors. Tourist pamphlets described Havana as "a paradise of cocktails."[22] Most drinks were

[18] Ibid. (37)
[19] "The American Bartender Invasion of 1920s Cuba." Accessed April 14, 2025. https://www.diffordsguide.com/encyclopedia/360/people/the-american-bartender-invasion-of-1920s-cuba.
[20] Woon (37)
[21] Morruzi, Peter. *Havana Before Castro: When Cuba Was a Tropical Playground*. Gibbs Smith, 2008.
[22] Ferrer (174)

Bacardí-based, and today, the credit for creating the Daiquiri is given to the Havana bars from this era. [23]

Beyond supplying alcohol to tourists, Cuba had a prominent role in the smuggling of alcohol into the United States during Prohibition. There was very little American prohibitionists could do about this, as international law only allowed countries to extend their laws within three miles of their coastlines. Cuban liquor smugglers, known as "rum runners", facilitated this liquor trade with Americans, with at least twenty-eight ships engaged in smuggling docked in Havana at any given time, carrying anywhere between 2,000 to 10,000 cases of liquor.[24] By providing a close port and taxes that were three dollars lower per case of alcohol than competitors like the Bahamas, Cuban Rum Runners were able to provide a wide range of products for their American buyers.[25] In the case of alcohol smuggling, as well as in tourism, Cubans often worked within a paradigm that bent to American wants and needs.

Facing the reality that the Havana bar scene may not be enough to maintain momentum in the Cuban tourism industry long term, government officials in Havana wanted to create more incentives for Americans to visit Cuba. Many countries supplemented nightlife tourism with activities that felt more appropriate in the daytime, such as art, historical, or cultural tourism. However, due to Cuba's status as a Spanish imperial landholding until the late nineteenth century, then being involuntarily passed over to the United States, Cuba was in cultural limbo, making the development of cultural tourism challenging. The struggle to create interest in cultural tourism comes at no fault of Cubans themselves; as put by Rosalie Schwartz, author of *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*,

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[23] Woon (34)
[24] Dorr, Lisa Lindquist. *A Thousand Thirsty Beaches: Smuggling Alcohol from Cuba to the South during Prohibition*. University of North Carolina Press, 2018. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469643298_dorr. (21)
[25] Lindquist (21)

"Cubans stitched together a marketable cultural identity from bits and pieces of their island life… they had no national costume, no traditional Cuban textiles, no distinctive religious art, no authentic tribal dances. The dominant, recognizable cultural image - Spanish colonial - was not uniquely Cuban." [26]

While certainly pre-colonial Cuban culture existed and continues to exist, there was no effort at the national level to organize and promote this aspect of Cuban identity. Rather, they invested in finding a new cosmopolitan identity based in the glamour and charm of Havana, even if that identity did not fit the majority-rural Cuban population.

A few tourists engaged with the sparse historical tourism available near Havana. In a 1925 travel log, writer Frank Carpenter wrote of his travels to "the old Spanish cathedrals and forts of the city…thronged with sight-seers from the United States."[27] The identification of these cathedrals as "Spanish" reveals how interest in these sites was not fueled by an interest in Cuban culture, but rather the desire to see remnants of a once-great Spanish empire. The lack of specificity of which cathedral or forts Carpenter visited additionally communicates that little effort was put into constructing the significance of these sights for tourists; there was no need to know the name of the building, its history, or why Americans should feel compelled to visit it.

The travel guide "Seeing Havana Intelligently" explained that Havana's historical landmarks would be best seen through the window of a hired car with an English-speaking chauffeur. [28] Many tourists took the picturesque train ride between Havana and Santiago de Cuba. On their journey, American passengers could view the plantations and huts many Cuban families lived in through the windows of their first-class train cars. [29] The tourists stayed in the car and the trains did not stop in these small towns, so Americans were left to assume this was because there was nothing worth seeing in rural Cuba. This can be blamed on the National

[26] Schwartz, Rosalie (76)
[27] Ibid. (3)
[28] Ibid.(56)
[29] Ibid. (4)

Commission for the Promotion of Tourism's disregard for building tourism infrastructure in areas outside of Havana and Santiago de Cuba, as well as American intolerance of discomfort while on vacation in Cuba. Basil Woon sought to dispute the rumors that visiting Santa Clara, Cuba, was a new hot tourist spot for Americans, writing,"Santa Clara has at present few attractions for the tourist and what attractions are there are counterbalanced by a lack of good hotel accommodation."[30] While this is just one American tourist's perspective, the lack of marketing of tourist destinations and investment in hotels outside of Havana and Santiago exemplifies a tourism strategy that does not seek to incorporate the entire country and extend the tourism industry outside of Havana, but rather chooses to focus on what they believe Americans will like most.

Focusing on vice tourism in the 1920s inadvertently cost Cuba their smuggling and supplying niche, as the burgeoning business of illegal alcohol in the United States quickly created competition between U.S. speakeasies and Havana bars. New York City saloons had signs outside their establishments saying, "Why go to Cuba?" slyly referencing that one would not have to leave the country to obtain alcohol. [31] Miami became Havana's primary competition, marketing itself as a similarly exciting, exotic destination, with alcohol available in its speakeasies. Less people were traveling to Cuba for the weekend, instead staying in Miami and taking newly established lines of steamboats, ships, and later, airplanes, for day trips to Havana.[32] It became common for men to have their wives stay in Florida while the men trailed off to Cuba for a night, often engaging in unsavory behavior. Basil Woon writes:

"Of course, once in a while a gentleman who has "parked the wife" in Palm Beach or Miami arrives, a bundle of lace and ribbons on either arm. They are hilarious for an afternoon or so,

[30] Woon (159)
[31] Lindquist (201)
[32] Bronfman (37)

while the "sugar daddy" gives his friends a few thousands to be with, and they put two thirds away in a safe place and bet the remainder - always, of course, losing." [33]

Here, Woon describes the fantasy of American men participating in Cuban tourism: gambling in a casino with the attention of "a bundle of lace and ribbons on either arm", likely referring to prostitutes. All of this occurs out of the surveillance of his wife, who has been left behind in Florida. As with alcohol, the nightlife scene gave Americans, specifically American men, the go-ahead to indulge in any vice.

This image of a dark casino, drinks flowing, and beautiful (and available) women abound became the new niche of Cuban tourism by the end of the 1920s. While alcohol was obtainable in the United States, a realm to engage in excessive drinking, gambling, sex, and debauchery was something only Cuba could offer to American tourists. Cuba's marketing primarily presented itself as a playground for Americans where anything goes, sinking further into the cycle of feeding into American whims.

The marketing of Havana leaned into a feminized, sexualized image, frequently using attractive women in their tourism ads. Promoters for Cuban nightlife emphasized the idea of Cubans as lusty and available and that sex was not sentimental to them: "Girls try to break men's hearts but not their own," one guidebook wrote.[34] Guidebooks additionally emphasized the diminishing role of chaperones or pimps, meaning accessing sex with ladies of the night would be easier. Guidebooks told men that they "need not carry your marriage certificate with you." [35]

The selling of sex in Havana led to an offensive objectification of Cuban women. Most accounts of Cuban women in guidebooks made for American tourists speak of Cuban women in a highly-sexualized tone: one guidebook described Cuban women as "lissome, languorous,

[33] Woon (55)
[34] Schwartz, Rosalie (55)
[35] Woon (9, 55)

warm-eyed, dark-skinned.", while another tells American men "you may stare at the pretty senoritas because such starting in Cuba is a compliment - not a crime." [36]

Clubs with more sensual elements began popping up in Havana in the late 1920s. Clubs like Infierno had "plenty of pretty Cuban and Spanish dancing-girls". La Verbena featured dancing where "few of the girls wear any clothes to speak of… the "naughtiest" public show in Havana." [37] A new subset of tourists emerged: people who considered themselves "pleasure-seekers", in that they visited Cuba and other tourist destinations for alcohol but also for an experience of amusement and activities that may be deemed unsavory while on American soil. Beyond promoting experiences to fulfill the endless American demand for pleasure, these efforts to emphasize the abundance of ways to gamble with your marriage or money developed into the tourism niche for Cuba after the 1920s.

III. The Creation of Ruins: Mexico in the 1920s

"Like most foreigners, when I came to Mexico I was ignorant of what Mexico really is. In those days there was not the literature that there is now on its history, culture, and art".

-Frances Toor, *Mexican Folkways*, 1932[38]

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was a reaction to excessive foreign influence and corrupt leadership in the country, which had grown particularly under the leadership of dictator Porfirio Díaz. His twenty-six year tenure saw an increase in American investment and presence in Mexico, as Díaz welcomed American businesses including J.P. Morgan and Chase Manhattan to invest millions of dollars into railroad construction and electrification.[39] Díaz permitted

[36] Ibid. (10)
[37] Ibid. (115-116)
[38] Toor, Frances. *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways: The Customs, Myths, Folklore, Traditions, Beliefs, Fiestas, Dances, and Songs of the Mexican People*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1947.
[39] Merrill (32)

American corporations to buy land in Mexico, often seizing land owned by Mexicans and selling it to his American allies; by 1910, 35% of Mexican land was owned by foreigners.[40]

The Revolution lasted ten years, resulting in the ousting of Díaz, the return of land to Mexicans, and the establishment of a constitutional republic. The new Mexican government rejected foreign influence, seeing it as detrimental to their autonomy and self-determination, and sought to reconstruct Mexico through a unifying national identity. It just so happened that Mexico's first post-revolutionary years overlapped with the passing of Prohibition in the United States, meaning there were lots of Americans looking for Mexico to supply their liquor.

Mexico's border towns were poor and in need of economic stimulation, and also happened to be the easiest towns for Americans to access, therefore many bars, catinas, brothels and saloons opened in cities like Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros, Mexicali, Nogales, Nuevo Laredo, and Tijuana. Many Americans frequented small border towns due to their small populations and thus small likelihood that they would run into anyone from home there, as their anonymity in a foreign town meant no word of any drunken debauchery would ever make it back home. Border control was relaxed in order to help the flow of American tourists to the border towns, with special passports being granted to anyone who wanted to travel to Mexico.[41]Tijuana was one of the most-visited border towns, as its location was very accessible from major cities like Los Angeles and San Diego. Tijuana was home to Agua Caliente, the definitive Mexican casino from this era, whose entertainment and opulence was said to match that of Monte Carlo.[42] Horse racing tracks, golf courses, and red light districts all followed the construction of casinos and bars, just as was happening in Havana.

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[40] Ibid. (32)
[41] Ibid. (32)
[42] Bonilla-Sanchez, Christian. "Agua Caliente: Perspectives on America's Deauville." M.A., San Diego State University, 2023. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2835687746/abstract/D5ECD795E7364448PQ/1. (59)

However, unlike Cuba, Mexico's tourism story of the 1920s does not start and end with alcohol. The availability of alcohol certainly got Americans interested in traveling to Mexico, however, new Mexican leadership wanted to expand the industry beyond that. They aimed to create a unified Mexicanidad: shared investment in Mexico's industry, national symbols, and history, as that would be beneficial for both uniting Mexico in its post-revolutionary era as well as creating intriguing tourism beyond alcohol. Hence, the story of American tourism in Mexico is best illustrated through its deliberate efforts to consolidate a uniform Mexican identity throughout the 1920s, as preparation for building a sustainable tourism industry.

One of the biggest challenges facing Álvaro Obregón, Mexico's president between 1921 and 1924, was whether to base Mexico's identity in its indigenous history, or its adjacency to the West with its Spanish-colonial past. Many believed it was in Mexico's best interest to align its identity with Western ideals, believing an embrace of indigeneity would prevent Mexico from being perceived as a modern society. However, in the post-World War I era, there was a newfound interest in the continent's indigenous history. Historian Robert F. Schrader wrote,

> "In the aftermath of the world war, many Americans awakened to a new interest in Americana and found that Indians were at the core of America's national experience. Their private convictions…now lacked the sense of racial superiority that previously had tainted attitudes towards Indian life." [43]

Conversely, some credited American interest in indigenous life to be part of the American superiority complex. A 1933 *New York Times* article reflected on the Mexican tourism boom in the 1920s, writing "people gave signs of being fed up with material comforts and turned, for a respite from the Machine age, to primitive cultures. Mexico lay close at hand."[44] In either

[43] Delpar, Helen. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican : Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935*. Accessed April 14, 2025. https://tufts.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay/alma991002232519703851/01TUN_INST:01TUN. (92)
[44] Delpar (55)

scenario, indigeneity was becoming intriguing to American tourists. Obregón chose to invest in building a Mexican identity which revered its pre-Columbian past.

This began with embedding aspects of "authentic" Mexican culture into the everyday lives of Mexicans. José Vasconcelors was chosen as head of the Department of Public Education between 1921 and 1924, spearheading a program to incorporate Mexico's indigenous heritage, specifically the teaching of folk dancing, into schools throughout the country.[45] The dissemination of one type of folk dance, despite the existence of dozens of indigenous groups with their own traditional dances, was in pursuit of standardizing this element of Mexican culture, creating an identifiable Mexican style that could be perceived and recognized as Mexican" by outsiders.

The Mexican government additionally wanted art that would have meaning to the Mexican population, as well as create buzz for any foreign visitors. One of the first initiatives under the Obregón administration was to organize an extravagant celebration for Mexico's centennial as an independent nation.[46] This included a Popular Arts exhibition, which featured a wide range of Native objects, all credited to Méxican indigenous artists, who brought an unrivaled authenticity to art in Mexico. [47] The government commissioned several muralists to paint the walls inside the Palacio Nacional, specifically to portray scenes of Mexican history

[45]Dickson, Mary R. "Exhibiting Indigenismo: Identity Creation in the State-Organized Exhibitions of Post-Revolutionary Mexico." M.A., Pratt Institute, 2023. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2835797511/abstract/357684C0912F4B7EPQ/1.
[46]Coffey, Mary K. "Marketing Mexico's Great Masters: Folk Art Tourism and the Neoliberal Politics of Exhibition." In *Holiday in Mexico : Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters*, 265–94, 2010. (270)
[47] Coffey (271)

before Spanish conquest.

Diego Rivera, "From the Conquest to 1930", History of Mexico Murals, 1929-1930, fresco, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City.[48]

Diego Rivera's piece "From the Conquest to 1930", part of the History of Mexico Murals collection, displays an assortment of figures from Mexican history, challenges the Mexican people have faced, and the struggle to protect their indigenous heritage and traditions. This mural is part of a larger series in the Palacio Nacional, which itself became a sought-after tourist attraction for its excellent display of art. The art scene in Mexico exploded, and Méxican art soon became a major point of interest for Americans, with the author of *Mexican Pathways*, an American-written travel magazine, describing her impressions of Mexican art while visiting in the 1920s:

"When I came to Mexico in 1922, the nationalistic art movement was already under way. In 1921, during the centenary celebration of Mexican independence, the beautiful, aristocratic, Chapultepec Park had opened to the people of the streets for the first time in history, so that they might enter to witness a performance of folk dances. Folk dances were also being introduced into the schools by the Federal Department of Physical Education…Like most foreigners, when I

[48]Rivera, Diego. *From the Conquest to 1930*. 1930 1929. Mural.

came to Mexico I was ignorant of what Mexico really is. In those days there was not the literature that there is now on its history, culture and art." [49]

Part of consolidating the Mexican identity was to create a unique Mexican aesthetic and style. Mexico City, the country's capital, was minted as the definitive destination to view Mexican excellence through architecture and art. The Zócalo, the main square in Mexico City, has existed since Aztec times as a ceremonial space, and has taken on many different purposes and looks throughout its long history. In 1920, the Zócalo and its surrounding areas were repaired and updated with Neoclassical and European-influenced architectural features. This remodel was done to emulate an architectural style that was already considered prestigious by many parts of the world, and thus could be appreciated in Mexico too. However, red tezontle, the red volcanic rock that is abundant in the Valley of Mexico, was added to the facade of the Zócalo, making the buildings more distinctly Mexican. The use of native materials was now a key aspect of Arquitectura Nacional (National Architecture), a newly-created blend of European as well as Indigenous elements, creating this aesthetic that could be uniquely Mexican.[50] Mexico was creating its own image out of its Revolution.

The Mexican government invested heavily into archaeology. Mexican archaeology in this era could be described as nationalist archaeology, as it was meant to draw attention to the excellence of ancient Mexican civilizations, for the nation's heritage was now considered the "bearer of the national spirit." [51] One example of the national revival or archaeology was the development of Chichén Itzá into a tourism site. This began with an agreement made between the Mexican government and the Carnegie Institute of Washington in 1923 to develop the ruins

[49]Toor, Frances. "Mexican Folkways." *Southwest Review* 17, no. 2 (1932): 230–37.

[50]Bross, Benjamin A. *Mexico City's Zócalo: A History of a Constructed Spatial Identity*. London: Routledge, 2021. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003052326.(159-162)

[51]Bueno, Christina. "Teotihuacán: Showcase for the Centennial." In *Holiday in Mexico*, 54–76. Duke University Press, 2010. https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780822391265-004/html.(57)

of Chichén Itzá for tourism, as well as constructing a field site to continue archaeological digs in the area. The good spirit around archaeology in the Yucatán was echoed by an American archaeologist on the Carnegie team, writing that the Chichén Itzá project was meant to create "a feeling of confidence by the Mexican government and people in the good faith of foreign scientific agencies". [52] Similarly, a journalist covering archaeological discoveries in Yucatán described what was found as "what is conceded to be the most important find of archaeological objects ever made in America".[53] Many Americans began traveling to the Yucatán to see Chichén Itzá, staying in the nearby town Pisté. Pisté benefited greatly from Chichén Itza, with many of their citizens going to work at the archaeological field site and hosting tourists in newly constructed hotels.[54]

Mexicans themselves were also encouraged to explore their vast country in this era, with many taking advantage of promotions made by the Interoceanic and Méxican railroads to travel to the gulf coast in search of warm beaches.[55] Veracruz in its post-revolutionary years became quite the lively city, with many Veracruzanos attending sporting events, social dances, concerts, and boating recreation. [56] However, Veracruz was most famous for its celebration of Carnival, a days-long pre-Lent celebration. Carnival had not been observed for many years in Veracruz due to the Revolution, however, Carnival came back in 1925 with new elements that showcased local culture and post-revolutionary nationalism. [57]

Americans and Mexicans alike joined in the Carnival festivities; Americans often took steamboats to Veracruz, with about three to four stopping in the port each day. Carnival was good

[52] Castañeda, Quetzil E. "In the Museum of Maya Culture: Touring Chichén Itzá." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. (113)
[53] Delpar (101)
[54] Ibid. (101)
[55]Grant, Andrew. "On The Selling of Rey Momo: Early Tourism and the Marketing of Carnival in Veracruz." In *Holiday in Mexico : Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters*, 77–106, 2010. (86)
[56]Grant (86)
[57] Ibid. (87)

business for the city, as visitors spent the day at the parades, participating in pageants, staying at local accommodations and patronizing local restaurants. In response to growing American attendance at Carnival, American companies like Kodak Cameras started placing ads in Veracruz. Bayer Aspirin even made a special ad with Carnival dancers, letting tourists know they could enjoy the festival fully without feeling the effects the next day.[58] More options arose to suit American clientele at Carnival: in 1929, VIP packages were offered to American tourists, promising they would be "whisked through customs, [and receive a] special train tour around Veracruz. [59] The case of Veracruz represents the effort of the Mexican government to spread the tourism industry across its country, as well as striking a balance between leisure and celebration while also building appreciation for Mexican culture.

Where Cuban leaders believed there was no history or culture to be found nor shown outside (and even in) Havana, Mexican leaders claimed theirs and even constructed culture as a means of putting together a unified front. Mexico was defined on the terms of Mexicans throughout the 1920s, rather than only focusing on building out accommodations and transportation that would be up to American standards. Mexico was not planned for tourists in the way Cuba was at this time, which was inadvertently attractive to many tourists. The wife of a traveling novelist reflected that "a trip to Mexico is more exciting than a trip to Europe, because the country is not standardized or touristed, and even the most inexperienced traveler makes his own discoveries".[60] American tourists expected the comforts they had at home, but just as importantly, they wanted to encounter something foreign and authentic. With Mexican culture re-defined and properly packaged, Mexico was ready to officially organize tourism at the

[58] Ibid. (91)
[59] Ibid. (97)
[60] Deplar (58)

national level. The Mexico Pro-Tourism Commission was created in 1928. [61] Shortly thereafter in 1929, President Portes Gil held a press conference and announced that Mexico would "join the race for the tourist dollar" and would work on making travel via the border and Mexico's ports easy and safe, as well as encouraging the construction of more tourist accommodations. By 1930, several hotels popped up around Veracruz, including the building of Hotel Colón, Hotel Imperial, Hotel Mexico, Pasaje, Zaragoza, Terminal, Diligencias, Buena Vista, Rex, Oriental, America, Palacio, Alhambra. [62]

While technically the tourism industries in Cuba and Mexico competed, the products of their industries were incredibly different. Cuba's tourism industry saw its quickest way to success as feeding into American hedonism and supporting those desires through growing aspects of illicit tourism. However, the way Mexico was marketed was very different. While their tourism industry did not take off in the same way Cuba's did in the 1920s, the slower build of the tourism industry in Mexico created more space for agency and autonomy for the country's own citizens, allowing them to define Mexico not through a performance of stereotypes, but through culture.

[61]Berger, Dina. *Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946*. University of Arizona, 2002. (42)
[62] Grant (86)

CHAPTER 2:
In the Driver's Seat: The Control and Differentiation of Mexico's Tourism Industry in the 1950s and beyond

I. Introduction

"The tourism industry has by no means taken the spirit out of all of Mexico's cities and towns. Even Acapulco is still a zesty Mexican place after a half century of Americanized tourism development"
-Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism beyond the Border*[63]

Tourism in Mexico grew slowly and carefully in the 1950s. The 1930s and 1940s provided pivotal time for the tourism industry to develop and for American opinion of Mexico and Mexicans to soften. Americans still had a sense of trepidation surrounding their Mexican neighbors, due to remaining tensions from their leftist policies following the Mexican Revolution. Mexican tourism was never directed at making Americans feel at home, or emulating American style beyond making accommodations comfortable enough for them to want to stay. Leaders in Mexico did accept American investment in their industry, and did want to attract American tourists, but aimed to do this through presenting Mexico and Mexican culture as something worth seeing.

II. Leadership in the 1930s and 1940s as Prelude to the 1950s Boom

While many Mexican presidents had an impact on the Mexican tourism industry going into the 1950s, no impact could compare to that of President Lázardo Cárdenas, who was in power between 1934 and 1940. He was seen as a benevolent man who remained true to the ideals of the Mexican Revolution; at his funeral in 1970, he was eulogized as "the greatest figure produced by the Revolution… an authentic revolutionary who aspired to the greatness of his

[63]Dagen Bloom, Nicholas. *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism beyond the Border*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. (7)

country, not personal aggrandizement." [64] Cárdenas found the ever-widening wealth gap within Mexico to be morally reprehensible, and tried to improve the distribution of wealth by involving the working class in public policy, and striving to create a stronger, more inclusive national identity and investment in the Mexican country. [65]

Public land that had been previously seized and sold to Americans privately was returned to Mexican citizens under Cárdenas. That land was utilized to create 10,000 ejidos, farms under collective ownership.[66] Cárdenas supported the construction of hotels in Mexico, but chose to limit collaboration from American companies and instead contract with Mexican companies. [67] Towns along the United States-Mexico border had suffered both neglect from the federal government and a generally poor reputation amongst Americans and Mexicans alike, thus inspiring Cárdenas to implement federal infrastructure programs along the border. [68] Modernized bus facilities, construction of gas stations, improved railway service, updated airports and sanitation reform doubled as infrastructure that would benefit tourists and public works that would benefit and better connect and incorporate Mexicans into the tourism economy across the country. [69]

Cárdenas's greatest accomplishment in the tourism realm was his 1940 Tourism initiative, in which he minted 1941 as "the Tourist Biennial", a full year to display the potential and progress of Mexico as a bonafide tourist destination. This began with the selection of Mexico City to host the Second Inter-American Travel Conference in 1941. [70] Not only did this show that

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[64]Weston, Charles H. "The Political Legacy of Lázaro Cárdenas." *The Americas* 39, no. 3 (1983): 383–405. https://doi.org/10.2307/981231. (384)
[65] Weston (386)
[66] Ibid. (387)
[67] Berger, *Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946.* (85)
[68] Bonilla-Sanchez (45)
[69] Saragoza (107)
[70]"The Second Inter-American Travel Congress." *Bulletin of the Pan American Union* 75, no. 9 (1941) (525–27).

the leaders of this conference believed Mexico City had the proper accommodations to house representatives from twenty different countries, but also that Mexico was to be an example for the other countries involved in the conference. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in response to the conference that "Mexico, more than any Latin American nation, would play a central role in spurring hemispheric and democratic solidarity". [71]

One of Cárdenas's most impactful initiatives for the tourism industry was his banning of gambling in 1935. The decree was received with much fanfare by the Mexican congress and Mexican citizens, and was put into effect shortly thereafter, forcing the closure of gambling halls as well as smaller-scale gambling organizations with slot machines throughout the country. As noted in an article from the Christian Science Monitor published in December of 1934, some consideration had been given to how this reform may impact the tourist trade, to which it was written that Cárdenas and his team were confident that "the number of tourists will not be diminished and that the harm gambling did to the country far outweighed any doubtful benefits indirectly accrued". [72]

The Tourist Biennial also featured the 1941 Department of Tourism's National Tour, during which presidents of American motor clubs and travel agencies were invited to see the "real" Mexico. The tour consisted of lunch at Ixmiquilpan to the sound of live mariachi, a stop at the Monumento de Buena Amistad and finally a visit to Fortín de los Flores in Veracruz, a town famous for its gardenias and orchids, where the visiting delegates were greeted by a hundred school children with bouquets of local flowers. [73] Through this tour, Mexico had re-introduced

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[71] Berger, *Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946* (85)

[72] "Cárdenas Astounds Mexico by Closing Gambling Dens; Liquor Ban Expected Next: New President Is Considered by Many to Indicate Era of Reform--Business Men Praise Anti-Gambling Move--State Lottery, However, Continues." *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 1934.

[73] Berger, *Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946* (88)

itself to the United States, not as a place that was foreign and therefore dangerous, but rather they were foreign but interesting. This tour, rather, presented Mexico as an intricate tapestry of various landscapes and unique towns, all worthy of exploration, with the New York Times describing it as the "Faraway Land Nearby".[74]

Cárdenas's legacy becomes complicated when considering how his frameworks to involve working class people in the government did not hold for long, as his successors were much more conservative than him. However, the long lasting principle of Cárdenas's tourism strategy, to make decisions based on the wellbeing and perception of Mexican citizens, not seize American dollars, held. His banning of gambling represented his prioritization of the livelihood of his citizens, even if it meant taking away a lucrative tourism market, as well as the reason behind Mexico's first tourism boom in the 1920s. This ban remained in place until 1987, proving the longevity of Cárdenas's influence.

Cárdenas's Tourist Biennial may have had some more immediate effects had World War II not stalled the American tourist market. Efforts to continue developing tourism continued within Mexico, anticipating a similar American post-war economic boom. On the eve of World War II, tourism had risen to be Mexico's fourth most lucrative industry behind mining, food and textile production. [75]

World War II was a pivotal point in the U.S.-Mexico relationship, as their alliance during the war eased some of the remaining tension between the countries. Mexico in the late 1940s and early 1950s had a "new look" to Americans, as Mexicans continued to be American allies through the Cold War period under a new more conservative, more capitalistic government

[74] Ibid.
[75] Zolov, Eric. "Discovering a Land 'Mysterious and Obvious': The Renarratavizing of Postrevolutionary Mexico." In *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, 234–72. Duke University Press, 2001.

regime that welcomed foreign investment and, of course, American tourism. [76] This more welcoming attitude of American investment could primarily be attributed to Miguel Alemán Valdés, who first served as the head of the Ministry of Gobernación, the agency that oversought the tourism industry, and later as President between 1946 and 1952. Valdes and his predecessor/Cárdenas's successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho, both inched Mexico towards a more opportunistic mindset when it came to tourism. Americans already liked Camacho more than Cárdenas, citing that Camacho was more prone to collaboration than fierce defense of his country. Camacho was described as an "affable man with brown eyes and a pear-shaped face who usually looks as though he had just been dealt a fine hand in a friendly game of poker."[77] This friendliness was key in the era of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy.

Aleman's presidency built on Camacho's rapport with Americans, kicking off his term with a large-scale renovation to the Mexico City airport between 1947 and 1953. The total cost for the renovation was close to 40 million pesos.[78] The government additionally renovated smaller provincial airports and invested in radio and communication technology to further modernize travel in Mexico. [79] By 1957, Mexico had 14 federal airports with efficient bus and train systems to keep travel effective even after landing. [80] The expansion of airports throughout Mexico worked in that it expanded transportation, and thus accessibility of many locations for tourists, including more regions in the Mexican tourism industry. However, this development was not without its faults, as the presence of Americanized airports was not received well by Mexicans. Writer Octavio Paz lamented the Mexican children now eating fast food and adults

[76] Zolov (235)
[77] Krauze, Enrique. *Mexico: Biografía Del Poder*. Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2014. (639-40)
[78] Soland, Peter. "The Miracle (and Mirage) of Mexican Flight: Aviation Development in Mexico, during and after the Second World War." *The Journal of Transport History* 40, no. 1 (June 1, 2019): 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022526618823931.
[79] Soland (34)
[80] Ibid.

drinking whiskey in airports, as it was a sign of surrendering to American globalization. [81] Even within the confines of the airport, this was too much Americanization. Understandably, Mexicans were always keeping an eye on ways American influence could be permeating into their culture, and did what they could to reject it.

The strategy of Camacho and Aleman was different from that of Cárdenas in that they did not see the United States as an enemy of their ideology or as a potential threat. Rather, they aimed to build themselves up as friends on an equal playing field to the United States. Part of this came through their policies of economic nationalism, or rather, primarily pulling from Mexican-owned businesses to modernize their industry. This prevented excess investment and control from the United States, however it did not make the Mexican tourism industry free from corruption: Aleman was known to give his supporters, like Vercruz oil tycoon-turned Acapulco hotelier, who also happened to support Aleman's presidential campaign, asked for and received various federal favors for developing Acapulco's tourism industry, privileging certain locations over others.

Aleman and Camacho certainly sacrificed aspects of Mexican life and agency to better fit the image of an American ally, but they also took a route in which Americans were instructed to respect and find common ground. In 1947, President Truman visited Mexico City, being the first American president to do so. During his visit, he laid a wreath at the Los niños heroes monument, which was built to honor young soldiers who chose to die rather than surrender to American troops during the American invasion of Mexico City in one hundred years prior. [82] This small gesture shows acknowledgement of the trauma caused by the United States to Mexico, and above all, an attempt to make amends and curry goodwill through tourism. It puts

[81] Ibid (37)
[82] Berger, *A Drink Between Friends: Mexican And American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s Mexico City* (9)

them on a more equal footing, and reveals how the United States planned to engage in tourism with more respect to Mexican history and culture.

II. "Resort City for Budgeteers": Mexico as a Wallet-Friendly Destination

The completion of the Pan-American Highway in 1951 kicked off the 1950s tourism era. Now, Mexico was accessible to anyone in the United States with a car and some spare change. According to a July 1951 pamphlet called *Pan American Highway: Backbone of Hemispheric Integration*, distributed by the International Road Referation, the completion of the highway was additionally regarded as proof of Mexico's ability to collaborate and fulfill its "obligation to the rest of the Western Hemisphere to complete its share of the highway - a link of more than 1600 miles - when it opened its road in May 1950 to the Guatemalan Frontier". [83] The pamphlet further describes the highway as being well-maintained, and touted how the Mexican branch of the highway connects with the United States highways at six different points, making easy access for motorists.

Exploration of Mexico by car was certainly made easier in the 1950s, but it was by no means a new phenomenon. Exploration through Mexico was experienced and described by tourists as some sort of recapture of the spirit of Manifest Destiny-era cowboys exploring the West, exploring off-the-beaten path areas. The introduction to the 1933 *Motorist's Guide To Mexico* puts it best:

"Those who know the leisurely pleasure of an automobile tour through their own country are now enabled to explore a land as foreign as the Orient by simply turning their wheels southward towards the Rio Grande. Those who are bored with Europe and the old familiar trails worn deep by generations of tourists now may visit - without a passport, without the expense and

[83] Fuller, Stephanie. "Pan-American Highways: American Tourism to Mexico and 1950s Hollywood Film." *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 2014. (14)

bother of an ocean voyage - a country as unspoiled and unexploited as any the present day world provides." [84]

As with many initiatives in the Mexican tourism strategy, there were benefits on both sides: the expansion of roads increased transportation options for Mexicans within Mexico, and additionally increased the likelihood that Americans would travel to destinations throughout Mexico, and Americans were able to bring along something that had become a large part of the American consumerist identity: automobiles. [85] Cars had become not only a symbol of American convenience, but also of identity. Mark Osteen wrote how American identity became inextricably linked with automobiles in the 1940s and 1950s, explaining that "Americans internalized their identification with cars, commodifying themselves via automotive self-extension. The selling of autos in the aftermath of World War II, when automobility was promoted as a solution to economic and social malaise, encouraged this process". [86] The use of cars, and therefore more freedom in one's route, allowed American tourists the ability to feel like lost cowboys on the road, and tap back into a sense of freedom they believe they do not have in the continental United States. Crossing the border was made very easy for American tourists at the Mexican border, not even needing a passport. As soon as Americans drove past the border, it was as if the vacation started "the moment the border is crossed". [87]

The rise of automobiles additionally expanded travel opportunities from just a highly privileged elite to the masses, meaning many more tourists were coming to Mexico than before, with most of them coming from more modest means. While Cuba had built itself up as a home away from home for visiting Yankees, with maximal effort to create comfort and familiarity for

[84] HathiTrust. "Motorists' Guide to Mexico / Michael and Virginia Scully." Accessed April 14, 2025. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b270294?urlappend=%3Bseq=21. (1,2)
[85] Fuller (1)
[86] Ibid. (15)
[87] Ibid. (11)

American guests (at an American-level price), Mexico found its niche by marketing itself as a financially accessible location.

According to *Mexico and Cuba on Your Own* , the anticipated daily cost of accommodations, food and activities in Mexico was just eight dollars, compared to thirteen dollars in Cuba. [88] This was an analysis of an average trip to anywhere in Mexico, but specific cities used their comparative cost-effectiveness to Cuba and other tourist destinations as a way to bring in more visitors. Acapulco, for example, using the blend of its reputation as a hideaway for Hollywood stars while hotel rates being low enough to welcome people of any means, marketed itself as a "Resort City for Budgeteers" and with slogans like "Pesos Go Farther at Story Book Acapulco". [89]

III. A Country Brought Together: Tourism as a Whole-Country Plan

"A small world-within-a-world. They wind through lush tropics, through temperature plateaus as inviting as our own Great Lakes region in the summer and even up to the mountain tops that suggest Alaska. They take you to the cities that were flourishing when Columbus was born and through villages where the men live today as they did in Biblical times. They lead to the ruins of buried civilizations vaster and more impressive than any in Egypt. At Acapulco they reveal a beach as perfect as those along the Riviera. At Tampico they present one of the great game fishing rounds of the world. In the tropical valleys you catch glimpses of the Far East, and in Mexico City, you can, with very little strain on the imagination, imagine yourself in Paris". [90]

-Motorist's Guide to Mexico, 1933

One of the most important aspects of the Mexican tourism industry in the 1950s was their effort to encourage travel outside of its capital Mexico City, adding tourism as a lucrative industry to many smaller local economies. Evident in the quote above, the worldliness of Mexico, and all of its different multitudes, were the most attractive elements of travel there. Its

[88] De Gamez, Tana, and Arthur R. Pastore,. *Mexico and Cuba On Your Own*. New York, N.Y., United States: R.D. Cortina Company and Garden City Books, 1954. (10)
[89] Fuller (10)
[90]Scully, Michael, "Motorists' Guide to Mexico" (1,2)

marketing utilized not only its difference from the United States, but also its differences between cities and regions, to market many destinations as worthy of a tourist's dollar.

The variety that could be found in a Mexican tour intrigued Americans. A 1952 New York Times article describes Mexico as a "land of contrast and charm…here you will find romance and excitement; sightseeing, resting and relaxing amidst exotic, colorful surroundings. You will experience unforgettable thrills exploring vestiges or ancient civilizations and when shopping in picturesque villages for unbelievably, beautiful handmade arts and crafts". [91] Another New York Times article from the late 1950s naturally brings up this contrast again, this time discussing travel into the Mexican countryside: "This is picturesque Mexico, doing work by hand and the sweat and pain of burden-carrying shoulders, using burros where trucks might more properly serve, taking refuge - outside the larger cities - in the daily siesta, celebrating with a kind of solemn gaiety on the market days and during the fiestas".[92]

The Cortina Language Guide gives many recommendations for travel destinations outside of Mexico City: Cuernavaca, Taxco and Acapulco as great secondary locations to Mexico City; Morelia and Guanajuato, both towns that played a large role in the Mexican War of Independence; Pátzcuaro, a city that has remains of the Purépecha Empire and Spanish colonialism; Guadalajara, "Mexico's Second City", Urapan, a city famous for its flowers; Volcanoes at Paricutín; Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz for important Spanish colonial holdings, and finally the Yucatán peninsula for more historical tourism, but in a jungle setting.[93] Tourists were assured that all locations have proper accommodations and encouraged to take nearly two week tours with experienced guides across these locations. Trips to Mexico were typically longer and included more locations than that of Havana, meaning a deeper exploration of the country.

[91] Saragoza (106)
[92] Zolov (241)
[93] Gamez and Pastore (123)

Important to the promotion of these locations was the emphasis on the Pre-Columbian heritage of Mexico, or rather, *indigenismo*, the revival and celebration of Mexico's indigenous heritage. What drew many people to Mexico was this perceived authenticity, primarily showcased through their embrace of indigeneity. Beyond lower resort prices, souvenirs from Mexico were described as being worthwhile and of good quality, while still being a bargain: heavy woolen sarapes (colorful fringe blankets) from Texcoco, lacquerware from Michoacan, earthenware from Guadalajara, rezbos (headcoverings) and silver goods from all over the country. [94] When comparatively speaking of souvenirs to get from Cuba, the authors write "shopping in Cuba can be just as tempting as it is in Mexico, but you will find prices rather high and bargains only in a relatively small number of native articles".[95] Tourists were warned in *Mexico and Cuba on Your Own* that while indigenous goods were abundant in Mexico, "Cuba has few handicrafts of the so- called "primitive" sort. The Cuban aborigine is extinct and has left few examples of such types of craftsmanship".[96]

Mexico City continued to welcome more tourists each year for its art, the Palacio Nacional and the Zocalo. However, as a means of promoting tourism, the Mexican government sponsored many projects to unifying, nation-defining displays of art and culture going into the 1950s. In 1938, Cárdenas founded the INAH, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, an overarching organization to strategize, approve and market all aspects of Mexican cultural heritage. One of its projects was the Ballet Folkorico, started in 1952, was the result of collaboration between choreographer Amalia Hernández, media mogul Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, and eventually the Instituto Nacional De Bellas Artes, an initiative under President Alemán to

[94] Ibid. (123)
[95] Ibid. (123)
[96] Ibid. (124)

promote a national artistic expression.[97] The Ballet Folklorico combined elements representative of many regions and sentiments in Mexico: revolutionary-era songs, traditional Veracruzano harp, the sounds of chirimía, and was popular enough to spur its own traveling American tour in 1962. [98]

However, while the INAH often promoted indigenous art niches, it always had the goal of creating a homogenous, nationalistic mestizo culture, and often sacrificed the individuality of different indigenous groups to achieve this.[99]The Mexican government created stock photos of Mexican culture and life, specifically of small town Mexican life, including women in china poblana costumes. These ornate dresses became symbolic for Mexico in the eyes of Americans, despite it not being culturally significant for all Mexicans. It was rather a cultural symbol created for Americans to understand Mexico, rather than for Mexicans to feel represented by. Presenting Mexico to outsiders meant choosing aspects of culture that best fit a marketable image, meaning the many Mexican indigenous cultures were blended into a predominantly Aztec or Mayan reference: china poblana costumes were worn and sold across Mexico, and mariachi was considered the all-encompassing musical expression.[100] The Ballet Folklorico is a more successful representation of the breadth of Mexican indigenous cultures, with one American reviewer of the tour saying, “our southern neighbor has several layers of civilization - Aztec, Mayan, Spanish conquistadores, Yaqui indians. It is a land of meztisos and peons, primitive rites, and Christian holidays”.[101] Displaying and creating space for indigenous representation is one step, but creating authentic displays of culture and history is perhaps impossible when creating

[97] Zolov (242)
[98] Ibid. (242)
[99]Pérez Expósito, Ana Beatriz. “Remote Analysis of Historical Mexican Textiles: Reconnecting Museum Objects with the Hands Who Made Them.” M.A., The George Washington University, 2025. https://www.proquest.com/docview/3154639611/abstract/30B1B67BF8E44505PQ/1.
[100] Saragoza (100)
[101] Zolov (243)

something for Americans (or any outsiders, for that matter). Writer and outspoken critic of the tourism industry Octavio Paz asked of his fellow Mexicans in a 1950s article: "What are we, and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?" [102] Ultimately, Mexico's individuality is what attracted so many Americans to the country, with Kate Simon summarizing the sentiments of travel to Mexico in the 1950s in her 1962 book Mexico: Places and Pleasures: "In a world which is becoming homogenized with fearsome rapidity, Mexico is still a wonderful confusion and melding of disparate facts, eras, art, sociology and mental climates. It is a country busily constructing dams, pulling roads out of the jungle, building automobile plants, and in the process, bringing to light its majestic antiquities". [103]

The connection of Mexico via new highways additionally created a domestic tourism industry. Specifically, the Mexico City elite participated in tourism, with one 1954 New York Times article giving credit to Mexican's control over their own industry, saying "The history of most Mexican tourist resorts has been discovered first by Mexicans from the capital… if they like a spot, a first class hotel is built."[104] The author of the article, Flora Lewis, goes on to give suggestions on new places in Mexico to visit that will not be as crowded with tourists, like Tequesquitengo, an amazing lake, known for its popularity amongst Mexicans, with the Mexico city elite even building houses there.[105] This quote is remarkable when compared to so much of the other language used in marketing any Latin American tourist destination, which often puts Americans in the place of "discoverers" or that these places respond to American voices and interest over all others. By admitting to Mexicans's status as the real trendsetters, disrupting the

[102] Berger, *A Drink Between Friends: Mexican And American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s México City*. (9)
[103] Zolov (247)
[104]Lewis, Flora. "Mexico DISCOVERY: Tourists Find New Fields to Explore When Crowds Jam The Old Haunts." *New York Times*, October 31, 1954
[105] Ibid.

narrative that these Mexican tourist destinations were made for Americans, it reminds American tourists of their place in the system.

VI: "Sun and Sand" Tourism: Acapulco in the 1950s

When comparing the development of the tourism industries in Mexico and Cuba, one must acknowledge that some of the circumstances that played a huge part in the development of these industries could not be edited or changed by anyone, like how Mexico's direct land connection to the continental United States enabled travel to Mexico by car (which will be touched on later), or how Mexico's geography is, generally speaking, more diverse than Cuba's. Mexico's 761,600 square miles of territory compared to Cuba's 46,426 not only means more space to roam in Mexico, but more types of terrain. Havana was already situated coastally, meaning tourists did not have to travel far to access beaches, harbors and so on. The location of Mexico City, landlocked and relatively centrally located within Mexico, advantaged the tourism industry in Mexico by making it necessary to explore other environments and activities in Mexico; Mexico City was by no means a one-stop shop in the way Havana was. This geographical coincidence gave rise to resort cities, like the famous Acapulco, beginning in the 1940s and throughout the 1950s. The growth of "sun and sand" tourism certainly juxtaposed the strategy of the tourism industry based in building Mexico up as a metropolitan and historical location, however this creation of yet another facet of Mexican tourism options created even more nuance in the American understanding of the country. However, as is the case with most other examples of more playful, relaxation or vice-oriented tourism, short-term profit was often prioritized over the well-being of citizens.

Acapulco began getting attention for its beautiful beaches in the interwar period, specifically by Hollywood stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Rita Hayworth.[106] Acapulco was described in the guidebook *Let's Visit Mexico* as "an ideal beach dotted with gay umbrellas ... a lovely place in which to lounge over a cup of coconut milk, and watch the natives dive for corals and seashells."[107] However, the surrounding area lagged behind other tourist destinations infrastructure-wise, and thus, President Aleman spearheaded the The Acapulco Regulatory Plan in 1945. [108] This plan was a strong plan of attack on the lagging modernization of Acapulco, proposing repaired water supply systems, drainage, highways, the beautification of the beaches, parks, and gardens, and the construction of markets, schools, hospitals, and parking lots. Aleman promised that his intention was to stimulate the economy in Acapulco and improve the lives of its residents, however, his subsequent treatment of Acapulqueños reveals his clear interest in catering to tourists. [109]

The Acapulco Regulatory plan was enforced quickly, likely in preparation for the end of World War II and an impending tourism boom. When issues regarding budget, implementation, or geography occurred, citizens of Acapulco were expected to put up with it all (and did). This included when President Aleman approved the expropriation of eleven edijos, or public land used for agricultural purposes from the surrounding area of Acapulco, citing them as an impediment to construction and "reinvigoration" of Acapulco.[110] While many aspects of tourism infrastructure had the dual effect of "reinvigorating" cities in Mexico, Aleman framing the

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[106]Bergeret Muñoz, Roger Joseph, Alejandro Quintero León, and Mónica Corazón Gordillo Escalante. "Complexity of Acapulco Evolution as a Tourist Destination." *Journal of Intercultural Management* 9, no. 3 (2017): 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1515/joim-2017-0011.

[107] Ryan, Alan. *The Reader's Companion to Cuba*. First edition. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997. Sackett, Andrew Jonathan. "The Making of Acapulco: People, Land and the State in the Development of the Mexican Riviera, 1927-1973." Ph.D., Yale University, 2009. https://www.proquest.com/docview/305040471/abstract/83288423C2584F14PQ/1.(291)

[108] Muñoz, Joseph, León, and Escalante (117)

[109] Ibid. (118)

[110] Ibid.

seizure of land as it will in turn help Acapulqueños was pure bluff. Citizens of Acapulco spoke out against this deception, such as in an editorial piece in an Acapulco newspaper in April 1952:

> "They have built their luxury hotels...and their vacation chalets, precisely with their windows to the sea, turning their back on the population. In this manner they have created a world apart, using the pueblo as a pedestal from which they can enjoy the view, the breeze and moonlight. Thus, the world of the millions invested in land, houses, hotels, clubs and all sorts of installations, completely ignores...the municipal necessities and does not relate in any form to the problems of the place". [111]

Beyond the issue of disruptive public work projects, preparation for the rush of tourists coming in the 1950s meant changes to working environments in the tourism sector. During the interwar period, many residents of Acapulco found work on the beaches, tending to tourists and beachgoers in general. Many people, primarily women, worked in puestos, stalls along the beaches where tourists could get towels, food recommendations, or have a spot to change into swimming attire. This is, until 1947, when tourism officials wanted to remove the "antiaesthetic and unhygienic aspects of the booths" and replace the independently-owned puestos with more modern beachside facilities. The owners of these puestos were assured that they would be able to continue their businesses in these new facilities, however, the rent for these stations was raised drastically, puesto owners were no longer able to oversee changing rooms (the most lucrative aspect of puestos), and despite promises of continuing their businesses, long-time puesto owners were not given priority in the limited space in the modern facilities.[112] Comparative to Cuba, the policies in Mexico were still more so fulfilling their promise of economic nationalism, as the puestos remained Mexican-owned. However, a reality of seemingly all tourist industries, the tourism industry lines the pockets of the already-wealthy and often disadvantages the citizens of these tourist towns.

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[111]Sackett, Andrew Jonathan. "The Making of Acapulco: People, Land and the State in the Development of the Mexican Riviera, 1927-1973." Ph.D., Yale University, 2009. https://www.proquest.com/docview/305040471/abstract/B53A5A40E7494259PQ/1.

[112] Ibid.

V. Pleasure-Seekers in Mexico City

Nightlife was part of the tourism industry, specifically in Mexico City, but was not central to the characterization of a trip there, as was the case in Havana. Dina Berger's essay "A Drink Between Friends: Mexican And American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s Mexico City" describes the lack of nightlife in Mexico City as a problematic gap in its tourism market as the post-World War II tourism boom began. And thus, more effort went into developing this aspect of tourism, not to exploit or draw attention to the sexualized aspects of American perception of Mexicans, but rather to modernize and play catch up with other metropolitan cities who had been developing exciting nightlife since before World War II.

Nightlife in Mexico City could hardly be described as hedonistic, as Mexicans were in just as high of attendance as Americans were, even creating a magazine, Noctámbulas, featuring pictures of Mexicans out at nightclubs and dance halls. It was such a different situation than in Cuba. In Mexico, nightclubs were "interactive spaces for Mexican and American pleasure seekers who helped bridge the gap of long-held misunderstandings between Mexico and the United States". [113]

In the section of *Mexico and Cuba on Your Own* describing Mexico City nightlife, the authors assure that "you do not have to be a jolly playboy to enjoy the elaborate floor shows, lively music, excellent food, exotic or regal surroundings." [114] Much of the guide boasts about the excellent food and dancing in Mexico City, with just two mentions of vice tourism: a club called El Colmenar described as "a dark, late, dancing and romancing spot where you can squeeze your partner while you dance in the smoky slumber to the laziest Mexican and American blues" and Leda, which was "definitely not a place to take the kiddies. This is where the Mexicans

[113]Berger, Dina. "A Drink Between Friends: Mexican And American Pleasure Seekers in 1940s México City." In *Adventures into México: American Tourism beyond the Border*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. (8)
[114]De Gamez and Pastore (151)

themselves go slumming. No show, nothing but…the customers themselves. That's enough and worth your trip and courage to go there." [115] While it is reasonable to assume that this widely published travel guide would not list out names and information for red-light district-esque activities, as to not advertise this "demoralizing" behavior to its readers, it is interesting to consider the subtly with which the author brings up more adult parts of nightlife. This is deeply contrasted with the Cuba section of the guide, in which there is a section dedicated to the explicit discussion of prostitution in Cuba.[116]

[115] Ibid. (155)
[116] Ibid.

CHAPTER 3:

"Practicality Had Superseded Morality": The Vice Tourism Strategy of Cuba's Tourism Industry in the 1950s

I. Introduction: *Guys and Dolls*

The popular American musical *Guys and Dolls* premiered on Broadway in 1950. It revolves around Sarah Brown, a missionary of an anti-gambling initiative and Sky Masterson, a high-rolling, gambling-obssesed stud. Masterson accepts a bet to bring the chaste, sheltered Brown on a date in the one place her purity can be tested: Havana, Cuba. When Sky brings Sarah to a nightclub and she unknowingly drinks an alcoholic "Cuban milkshake", she kisses Sky and sings how her good-girl persona is unraveling in the song "If I Were A Bell":

> "Ask me how do I feel
> Little me with my quiet upbringing
> Well, sir, all I can say
> Is if I were a gate, I'd be swinging"
>
> "Yes, I knew my morale would crack
> From the wonderful way that you looked
> Boy, if I were a duck, I'd quack
> Or if I were a goose, I'd be cooked"

While the story takes place in risqué Havana, Sky and Sarah do not give in to temptation: Sky remains dedicated to his virginal American love interest despite the presence of sensual Cuban women surrounding him. Sarah, despite her accidental drunkenness, maintains her virginity throughout her trip. The story of Sky and Sarah ends with their marriage, and with the end of Sky's gambling career.

This musical gives insight into how Americans viewed Havana leading into the 1950s: the site of gambling, sex, sensuality and debauchery, with Sky and Sarah's resistance to succumbing to temptation as a model for American behavior (one that was rarely followed).

Havana, rather than a city with its own complex history and present, was a mere backdrop for a coming-of-age American adventure. Sarah Brown's character was influenced by the strong imposition of purity and sexual conservatism in the United States post World War II. A tightening up of sexual norms in the United States meant eliminating eroticism from all parts of culture: the banning of erotic books and magazines, new campaigns to punish abortionists, and increased vigilance on American youth for fear they were uprooting these strict norms. Of course, the reeling in of American sexual culture did not halt sexuality and interest in sex outside of marriage, nor did efforts from the American government to prevent American boys like Sky Masterson from gambling stop them.

This salacious reputation in Cuba ultimately led to this use of Cuba as an outlet for Americans to get out their bad behavior, keeping their reputations on U.S. soil untainted. This arrangement was imposed with access and permission granted by Batista, whose tourism policy prioritized American interest in Cuba, rather than prioritizing Cuban agency and autonomy. This created an unsustainable tourist industry in Cuba in the 1950s, best seen in the growth of a gambling industry that was detrimental to Cuban reputation, a sex work industry that pushed the fetishization and objectification of Cuban women, and excusal of a quasi-imperial regime at Guantánamo Bay by American military officials and their families.

II. At the Mercy of Americans: Batista's Origin Story

The historic economic boom in the United States after World War II (1939-1945) gave way to greater consumer spending, industrial production, and, of course, newly-found disposable income for an increasingly large American population to spend on vacations. No leader in Cuban history pursued and accepted American influence more than Fulgencio Batista.

Raised in the rural region of Banes, Cuba, Batista grew up poor and at first went to work as a sugar cane cutter. [117] He joined the military in 1921 as a stenographer, and immediately faced the strong class divide within the Cuban military, as the supervising officers were most often from wealthy families, while enlisted soldiers mostly came from poor families. Batista and the other enlisted soldiers were dressed differently, given different privileges, were forced to perform all maintenance duties and give up their seats at local performances as signs of deference and respect to the higher-status officers. [118] Batista was reportedly frustrated with the treatment of himself and other men from similar backgrounds, and yet, he kept trying to succeed in the military, attending technical school at the Colegio San Mario to improve his stenography skills. [119] So much of Batista's motivations for success and validation amongst his more privileged peers comes from his initial mistreatment in the Cuban military. As Frank Argote-Freyre writes in his 2006 biography *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of a Dictator*

> "Batista was a man who had climbed out of desperate poverty, mastered a professional skill, and clawed his way to the rank of sergeant after ten years in the Cuban Army. He was unimpressed by the "professional" officers, who believed it was their birthright to receive promotions and benefits. Batista was self-educated, and he proved a capable teacher and pupil. He had read more books and knew more of the world than most of his superiors. He believed he was as smart as they—no smarter. Time would prove him correct in that assessment." [120]

Batista continued to rise through the ranks of the military, soon becoming a well-connected stenographer who traded information to accumulate more power. As the 1930s ushered in and discontent with President Geraldo Machado reached an all-time high, he soon joined ABC, a top-secret nationalist organization working to overthrow Machado [121] ABC's plan was to destabilize the Cuban government via terror while also getting the attention of the

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[117] Argote-Freyre, Frank. *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of a Dictator*. Rutgers University Press, 2006. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhx71. (70)
[118] Argote-Freyre (70)
[119] Ibid. (71)
[120] Ibid. (97)
[121] Ibid. (84)

American government, showing them that the Machado regime could not protect the business of American people and corporations within Cuba, hoping to secure American intervention. [122]

Ultimately, Batista saw these power dynamics as not something to protest, but rather a fixed fact. He did not believe in dismantling systems of unfair treatment, instead believing it to be the only possible way to re-position oneself within that dynamic. Batista did not always have his eye on taking over the government himself; his distaste for Machado was actually relatively moderate. He joined the movement more so to ensure his place in a post-Machado Cuba. [123] However, his role as an informant became important upon the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, who made Cuba the testing ground for his new foreign policy, the Good Neighbor Policy, meant to facilitate closer and more friendly relationships with Latin America. [124] Roosevelt appointed Summer Welles as the American ambassador to Cuba, who soon after traveled to Cuba to help mediate public unrest. While on his visits to Cuba, Welles stayed in first class accommodations at the Hotel Nacional.[125]

Machado was ousted on August 12, 1933, with Roosevelt giving Welles permission to pick the provisional leader of Cuba on behalf of Cubans, reflecting the facetious nature of the Good Neighbor Policy. Welles chose Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who was quite unpopular amongst Cubans. Using his newfound political power, Batitsa worked with a coalition to run the Cuban Revolution of 1933, also known as the Sargent's Revolt, successfully installing a government known as Pentarchy, a five person presidency. This government lasted days before being ousted and replaced by a new president, Ramón Grau, who upset the United States by refusing to make a plan to repay the 4.2 million dollar debt owed to Chase Bank taken under

[122] Ibid. (88)
[123] Ibid. (99)
[124] Ibid. (103)
[125] Ibid. (103)

Machado's regime. Grau was a staunch nationalist, and his election reflected a growing sense of national spirit as well as growing discontentment with the United States within Cuba. The Cuban Nationalist Movement was strongest in the Afro-Cuban community, which faced separation and mistreatment by white Cubans, likely due to remnants of a European-influence caste system installed under Spanish imperialism. A combination of Jose Martí's definition of a mutli-cultural Cuba through his poetry and a growing national consciousness after the end of Spanish colonialism inspired many Afro-Cubans to lead the conversation about the future of Cuban society, opting to place themselves at the forefront, and building a Cuban culture that is accurately multiethnic.[126] Their movement, or *regeneración*, was uplifted through the creation of mutual aid societies and opporutnities for political discussion in the hopes of comitting to the protection and promotion of a culture and national image that actually reflected Cuba.

However, Grau's "Cuba for Cubans" attitude did not make the Yankees happy – the Grau regime was described as "antagonistic to capital and business in general, [the government's] very existence has completely destroyed [the] confidence of the commercial, industrial and agricultural interests of the nation and produced almost complete paralyzation of these activities." [127] While Batista clearly had his issues with Machado's policies, they did see one thing the same way: American aid and involvement in Cuba was not just necessary, but inevitable. In an interview with Machado years after his departure from Cuba, he said, "To pretend that Cuba can distance itself from the United States is a political and economic error in

[126] MORRISON, KAREN Y. "Civilization and Citizenship through the Eyes of Afro-Cuban Intellectuals during the First Constitutional Era, 1902–1940." *Cuban Studies* 30 (2000): 76–99. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24487754. (78)
[127] Welles to Buell, October 24, 1933, Welles Papers, Latin America files, 1933–1943, Cuba, 1933, B. The Chamber of Commerce's view was expressed by its president, Maurice T. McGovern; McGovern to Welles, November 15, 1933, Welles Papers, Latin American files, 1933–1943, Cuba, 1933, E-F, in *Fulgencio Batista: The Making of a Dictator*

addition to being a historical error." [128] Detailed again in Argote-Freyre's biography, Batista's ambition to take over power from Grau did not come from a goal to be the leader himself:

"But, foremost in his mind was to cobble together a government that could endure. As the weeks passed, it became obvious to Batista that the United States would never recognize the Grau government. Without recognition, a cycle of violence and confrontation was inevitable as different political players sought to create a new ruling coalition" [129]

Believing the only way forward was to establish a regime that would be respected and accepted by the United States and the world at large, Batista declared himself as the legitimate Army Chief Of Staff and mobilized other enlisted men from Cuban military forces to join him. This ironically culminates in the Battle of the Hotel Nacional on October 2nd, 1933, where Julio Sanguily Echarte, the man Batista replaced himself with, and Summer Welles were staying. This bloody fight at the era's strongest symbol of American influence and burgeoning tourism industry resulted in Batista's victory, after which he secured power in the country and ruled until seeking proper election as President in 1940.

In his times of leadership before and during presidency, Batista established himself as a sort-of benevolent dictator, believing in centralized federal power for managing capital and labor, while also wanting to provide support and stability to all Cubans. His initial promises as President and past with ABC made Batista seem like a nationalist himself, and perhaps he was, however, he ultimately decided to mold his position from a President to an autocratic dictator, silencing the Cuban Nationalist movement. To Batista, an Afro-Cuban-forward nationalist movement and tourism could not exist together, as the goals of these movements contradicted each other. If the Afro-Cuban Nationalist sentiment grew, it may transform Cuba in a way that no longer made it attractive to American tourists. Ultimately, Batista chose to sacrifice Cuban

[128] Argote-Freyre (67)
[129] Ibid. (181)

nationalism for the sake of keeping the American government happy and the American tourists coming, perhaps the path he believed would see the least resistance.

Batista kicked off the 1950s tourism boom in Cuba by returning from a nearly decade-long stint in Daytona Beach, Florida to run for president again in 1952. He lost the election to Carlos Prío Socarrás, but quickly returned with another coup and became dictator. While the mystery remains around the level of involvement from the United States in Batista's coup, they certainly knew of it before it occurred: American weapons were utilized on the side of Batista.[130] In an article called *Batista at Work* published in Newsweek on March 24, 1952, the author claims that "except for the violent overthrow of Prío, everything Batista has done since he came to power has the tacit approval of the State Department." [131]A few months later, in the article *Cuba Tires of Corruption*, published by TIME magazine, an American journalist argues that Batista's claim to power was accepted without contest due to the passivity and general hopelessness amongst Cubans for a functional democracy. He rationalizes, "the failure of Cuban democracy and government" was due to their differences in "history, geography, climate, religion, and race" to the United States.[132] Failures and instability within the Cuban government leading up to the 1950s created a consistent media narrative of Cuba and Cubans as below the United States and Americans due to their inability to maintain democracy and avoid corruption. Americans would continue to co-opt this narrative as motivation to further stake their claims in Cuba as tourists: they believed the presence of Americans was not just wanted, but *needed*.

III. "Casino Cheaters": Gambling in Cuba

[130] Schwartz, Rosalie (156)
[131] Gardiner, Clinton Harvey. "Latin America in the Cold War." *The H. W. Wilson Company*, no. The Reference Shelf, Vol. 24, No. 6 (1952). (72)
[132] Gardiner (71)

Gambling had a place in Cuban life since the beginning of Spanish colonialism when the Conquistadors introduced gambling as a way for native Cubans to earn money and raise their social standing. Gambling in Cuba remained ingrained in daily life even after Spanish colonial rule dissolved, but was considered a national plague by native Cubans. This sentiment is echoed by a 1950 article by an American, Manuel Lopez Rey, which highlights the lack of a proper term for "gambling" in the Spanish language - most situations called for word "jugar", which broadly translates to "to play" and is used across many contexts - as evidence as to why gambling is so integral to the greater Latin American identity. [133] Attempts to ban gambling were futile; President Carlos Prío attempted to ban gambling in 1949. This decree was repealed within a year as it caused the bankruptcy of many hotels and casinos, which at this point were vital for the Cuban economy. The sentiment amongst Cubans after the ban was lifted was that "practicality had superseded morality." [134]

Havana was in a tough spot. Cubans actively fought to end the unchecked levels of gambling, and once reform was implemented, bankruptcy in the hotels and casinos almost immediately followed. This maintains a pattern of the United States essentially coaxing Cuba into economic dependency; whether it be sugar or tourism, Cuba's economy was designed over years of collaboration with Cuban leaders and presidents who curry good favors with American leaders rather than good deals for the Cuban economy and people. It was clear that gambling would have to be permitted in Havana to prevent the failure of several newly constructed hotels; however, Batista took gambling further than his predecessors had before.

[133]Lopez-Rey, Manuel. "Gambling in the Latin American Countries." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* Volume 269, no. 1. Accessed April 14, 2025. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271625026900117.
[134] Schwartz, Rosalie (126)

While living in Daytona Beach in the late 1940s, Batista struck up a friendship with American mobster Meyer Lansky and other men previously of the bootlegging profession. Batista invited Lansky and other mobsters in exile to work with him on casino development in Havana, which was very intriguing to the many Americans who had watched the televised New York court proceedings against these enigmatic gangsters. [135] By building out its gambling industry, Cuba could differentiate itself from its competition destinations, like Mexico, where gambling remained illegal throughout the 1950s.

Taking advantage of the formidable, albeit alluring, reputation of Cuba as a gambler's paradise, Batista made the exiled gangsters the face of casinos in Havana. Interestingly, when questioned why the activity abroad of Lansky and others like him were tolerated in Cuba, U.S. Ambassador Earl Smith said that, "it seems to be the only way to get honest casinos" in Cuba. [136] So long as they were off U.S. soil, Lansky and the other bosses were no longer a problem, and as insinuated by Smith, American oversight, even if by gangsters in exile, led to more "honesty" than an operation run solely by Cubans.

One of Lansky's first actions in continuing his casino business in Havana was to invent a new game to pilot in casinos: Razzle Dazzle. It was fast-paced, nonsensical, and almost guaranteed to make the tourists lose thousands of dollars. [137] While initially this game was successfully making money, stories about the crookedness of Cuban gambling spread to the United States. Namely, Dana C. Smith, lawyer and friend to (at-time) Senator Richard Nixon, described how he was roped into playing a 'free game,' only to lose thousands of dollars. Upon his return home, Smith nullified the charges from the Cuban casino, and Nixon spread this story

[135] Rovner, Eduardo Sáenz, and Russ Davidson. "Gambling in Cuba." In *The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution*, 81–94. University of North Carolina Press, 2008. (85)
[136] Rovner and Davidson (90)
[137] *The Saturday Evening Post*. "Suckers in Paradise." March 28, 1953.

far and wide. This cemented Cubans in the American mind as "Casino Cheaters." [138] Batista briefly attempted to suspend the legality of gambling, to the uproar of the casino owners, only to rescind his decree once the bosses agreed to stop playing Razzle-Dazzle.[139] This blunder was covered in the *New York Times*, and seemingly only built upon the idea that mob bosses, crazed gamblers, and other illicit activities ran wild in Havana.

The popularity of gambling amongst tourists was certainly due to some kind of fantasy amongst visiting Americans of playing high-stakes card games against foreigners who were not afraid to lose it all – authentic gambling. While Americans were drawn to the authenticity and competitiveness of gambling in Cuba, that did not mean they were prepared for when they lost big. A famous exposé of Cuba's gambling was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* for the week of March 28th, 1953, titled *Suckers in Paradise*. The article followed the Gran Casino Nacional, run by Lansky, describing the city as a place "where American gangsters in exile clip tourists for millions, with outrageously crooked games." [140] When Americans lost thousands from gambling, Cubans were the ones to blame: "[Cubans] want to cash in on America's thirst for gambling, as Cuba cashed in on another thirst during prohibition." [141] By contributing to the perception of Cubans being cheaters or grifters, Americans were able to participate in Cuban casinos and attribute their behavior to the influence of the atmosphere. It was advantageous for Americans to ban or stigmatize things they deemed "below" them, like gambling, only to do those things in Cuba. Interestingly, when asked why figures like Lansky were tolerated in Cuba, U.S. Ambassador Earl Smith said that "it seems to be the only way to get honest casinos" in Cuba.[142]

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[138] Schwartz, Rosalie (142)
[139] *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*. "Cuba Puts Lid On Gambling But It Slips." 1953.
[140] *The Saturday Evening Post 1953-03-28: Vol 225 Iss 39*. Benjamin Franklin Literary & Medical Society, 1953.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Rovner and Davidson (90)

From this early collaboration between Lansky and Batista comes the perception that Cuba was under Mafia Rule in the 1950s. This perception is still held today; as Cuban travel is opening up more in the 2020s, travel blogs and agencies are advertising "mob sites" as tourist attractions.[143] However, recent scholarship has called this alleged domination of the mafia in 1950s Cuba into question. At the end of his life, Meyer Lansky did tell-all interviews discussing his life in Cuba, sharing his perspective that he and fellow mobsters ran Cuba, ultimately diminishing the role of Batista or Cuban citizens in the development of casinos. [144] This led to the phenomenon of historiographic imperialism, in that it reinforces the idea that a few American mobsters could arrive and "take over" or "build" Cuba. [145] Mobsters coming in to run whatever gambling games they want to, American citizens were made to believe that they could do anything they desired, and that they would be free to do so in Havana.

VI. From Plane Seat to High-Rise Hotel: The Modernization of Infrastructure

Two new highways were built in Havana, creating less dense city traffic and a very Americanized suburban sprawl. [146] However, the building of roads was considerably less than the construction of central highways in Mexico, with most roads still leaving more rural areas of Cuba disconnected from Havana and other big cities. No real effort was put into increasing transportation throughout the country in this area; thus, to most tourists, most of Cuba was considered drive-by towns. Cortina Language Guide writes, "Your trip to Cuba will be shorter [than your trip to Mexico] and since you'll be spending most of your time in Havana, there is not too much to worry about on this score…". [147] Later the guide writes that, "To most American

[143]Argote-Freyre, Frank. "The Myth of Mafia Rule in 1950s Cuba: Origin, Relevance, and Legacies." *Cuban Studies*, no. 49 (2020): 263–88.

[144] Argote-Freyre, "The Myth of Mafia Rule in 1950s Cuba: Origin, Relevance, and Legacies." (267)

[145] Ibid. (268)

[146] Ibid.

[147] De Gamez and Pastore (43)

tourists Havana is the be-all and end-all of their Cuban vacation." [148] By not creating and promoting worthwhile tourist experiences aside from a few select cities, important representation of Cuban identity was left out of the American understanding of the country, leading many insinuations to the lack of indigenous heritage and presence in Cuba.

The Jose Martí International Airport completed renovation in 1956. The total renovation cost was 1.5 million (roughly 11.3 million dollars today, adjusted for inflation). The airport featured a terminal that was hundred times larger than its previous size, and added American-friendly restaurants and passenger salons throughout the airport. [149] New comfortable travel accommodations like this airport contributed to the number of American tourists reaching 356,000 in 1957. [150] This initiative not only represents how Batista invested in tourism throughout the 1950s, believing it would continue to be Cuba's primary industry for decades to come, but also another gesture to make travel even more comfortable for American guests: getting a white-tablecloth meal in the airport or a drink before the flight. The Havana airport was no longer a loading dock, but an experience that eased Americans into their Cuban vacations. Cuba-specific airlines were created, such as Cubana Airlines, were specifically created to extend the 'Cuban experience' to the flight to Havana. Eight plane seats had been removed on their jets to make room for a stage, on which dancers, acrobats, and a band would perform.[151] Clearly, the Cuban tourism strategy was to go above and beyond, even if it meant getting theatrical and ridiculous, all to capture the American gaze, attention, and dollar.

Another significant construction in this era was hotel construction. Many high-rise hotel buildings were put up in Havana in this decade; however, a study in Havana revealed that

[148] Ibid. (213)
[149] Merrill (122)
[150] Pérez (167)
[151] Morawski (55)

residents were never consulted during most major hotels built in the 1950s.[152] Environmental impact came from the construction of several high-rise hotel buildings: the island's geography requires a coastal breeze to cool down, and without it, extreme temperatures ensue. Of course, hotel construction happened so rapidly in the 1950s with very little consideration to the long-term effects it may have in Havana. The city streets became dangerously hot, making costly air conditioning necessary in hotels and homes. Given that Batista had revoked their right to free speech and protest, Cubans could not fight back and prevent their land from being rebuilt for Yankee tourists.

VI. "Americano, por favor": Marketing and Americanization of Havana

In the eyes of Americans, Cuba had been a rich person's destination, which was a combination of the truth—trips to Cuba were known to be more expensive to trips to other locations, such as Mexico—and proof of effective marketing: the glamorous hotels, ornate bars, high-betting gambling tables and more communicated Cuba as the wealthy American's playground. While this emulation of American sensibilities and near-recreation of American comforts in Cuba certainly brought tourists to Cuba, eventually, Americans began to complain about how comfortable Havana had become.

Shopping in Cuba was depicted as being more expensive and akin to shopping in America. *Cuba and Mexico on Your Own* describes shopping in Cuba to be just as tempting as it is in Mexico, but that the prices were rather high, and that most merchandise had "Made in the U.S.A. stamped on it."[153] The guide continues lamenting Cuba's lack of appealing "authenticity" to the tourists:

"We must admit that with every trip we make to Cuba reveals to us more clearly one sad reality. In a great eagerness to copy everything thought of or made in the United States, Cuba is

[152] Merrill (142)
[153] De Gamez and Pastore (123)

losing some of the best traits left by the Spainiards and discarding the old and acquiring the new with little discrimination. Spanish culture is being rapidly supplemented and replaced by everything American that can possibly travel there by ship, air or wireless. When the Cuban goes shopping he invariably specifices, "Americano, por favor"...Of course, this tremendous admiration for everything American works to the advantage of the tourist, who finds himself very much at home the moment he sets foot in Havana, where he is received and welcomed everywhere." [154]

Cuba and Mexico on Your Own's section on worthwhile souvenirs from Mexico listed many objects that harken back to Mexico's indigenous heritage, which had been put at the center of its tourism marketing. However, no effort was put to that end in Havana, confirmed by the guide declaring indigeneity in Cuba as essentially extinct: "Unlike Mexico's Indians, then, there are no traces in contemporary Cuba of these first inhabitants of the islands" and later, quite plainly, the guide writes "The Cuban aborigine is extinct." [155] In an effort to make Americans feel at home in Havana, Batista and other tourism officials missed the opportunity to reintroduce Cuban history and culture, to the point where Americans believed they had none to share. This is further demonstrated by the fact that *Cuba and Mexico on Your Own* makes no mention of any art museums or cultural centers worthy of visiting in Havana, but lists many in Mexico. The only remotely-cultural sites American tourists were encouraged to visit were monuments that reflected American presence in Cuba, such as the Maine Monument, built in 1925. The Maine Monument honored American officers and sailors who died in the explosion of the USS Maine, an American battleship that had been docked in Havana during the Spanish-American War. The guide writes that this memorial for American soldiers on the Malécon Boulevard in Havana "was erected as a testimonial of the gratitude of the Cuban people to the United States, and is one of the most beautiful monuments of Havana."[156] Another monument mentioned in the guide was Parque de Fraternidad (Fraternity Park), built in 1928 after the sixth Pan American Conference.

[154] Ibid. (75)
[155] Ibid. (63, 124)
[156] Ibid. (205)

Ironically hinting at the Americanization and commercialization within Havana, visitors were encouraged to visit Fraternity Park, and then encouraged to the Sears Roebucks Department Store located right next to the park. [157]

V. A City Devoted to Love and Romance: Sex Tourism in Havana

In a 1950s English-Spanish glossary of the 39 most 'important' phrases for the US tourist, four of these most essential words were: "pretty: bonita; beautiful: hermosa; a brunette: una triguena; a blonde: una rubia."[158] The insinuation that an American tourist would need these words conjures to mind American bars trying to charm ladies by calling them "bonita", or needing to know the difference between "triguena" or "rubia" when describing the kind of woman they are looking to spend the night with. Of course, these glossaries do not go as far to describe the situations a tourist may need these words for; rather, conversing with and soliciting women was implied as part of the experience.

Travel guides avoided vulgarity and directness when describing nightlife, but certainly dropped hints for where and how American men could encounter sex tourism, if they pleased. *Cuba and Mexico on Your Own* features a small section on "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Evening" (there is no such section in the Mexico portion of the book). Tourists were encouraged to visit Havana's Chinatown, which at night becomes, "a buzzing playground, visited by Cuban playboys from uptown and adventurous tourists."[159] The guide also describes the situation many tourists should expect to find themselves in on a Havana street: "The best thing you can do is smile politely and pass on your way with a simple 'I don't speak Spanish' or 'I'm sorry I'm not interested.' Otherwise the ladies of the evening will follow you, for blocks, even for miles if

[157] Ibid. (204)
[158]Click, Virginia "Rosie." "Power and Tourism in Cuba, 1902-2022 - ProQuest." *Tulane University*, April 2022. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2726587813?pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses. (77)
[159] De Gamez and Pastore (210)

necessary, if they think you're a good prospect." [160] The guide explicitly instructs the tourist to ignore the advances of prostitutes; however, implicitly, it gives Americans the expectation that women in Cuba were readily available and that as an American, they will be desirable and pursued. The image of a lady of the evening following a tourist for blocks, what an American tourist may interpret as a clear display of desire, was likely a tempting thought for an American man, with the logic of the book even complementing the man by deeming him a "good prospect."

Havana was primarily seen as a men's destination, due to the wide range of distasteful activities available in the city. Mob lawyer Frank Raganno reflected: "I have old-fashioned conservative notions about taking respectable women to places of debauchery, so I decided never to return to Havana with my wife."[161] Sex work patronage was primarily male; however, women were also participants in the sex industry in Cuba, albeit underreported. Cruise ships to Havana in the 1950s were filled with female passengers, with Cunard Cruise reporting that 65% of their passengers to Cuba were women by the mid-50s. [162] American tourists came to Cuba often with the intention of misbehaving and unwinding, for they knew their vacation was short, and they would eventually have to return to a world with standards and consequences.

American journalists remarked that Havana was, "a place where American high school and college boys of the 1950s came to relieve their sexual tensions in surroundings that were not forbiddingly foreign."[163] This often meant going to Havana's Red Light District, which had hundreds of brothels and over 11,000 prostitutes in the 1950s. [164] "What happened in Havana stayed in Havana," was further exemplified in mob lawyer Frank Reganno's story about John F.

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[160] Ibid. (211)
[161] Ryan, Alan. *The Reader's Companion to Cuba*. First edition. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997. (163)
[162] Merrill (131)
[163] Ibid. (129)
[164] Ibid.

Kennedy's visits to Havana before his presidency. He said Kennedy was given a special suite at the Commodoro Hotel by his American friends who now lived in Cuba, with a special one-way mirror that allowed the mob bosses to watch Kennedy and two call girls.[165] The activities of politicians, leaders, neighbors, and family men would have never been tolerated if they occurred on U.S. soil; however, what happened in Cuba stayed in Cuba—guilt was absolved on the plane trip home.

Cuban women often joined sex work industries for a multitude of reasons: money, lack of other options, sex trafficking, or even as a way to escape the poverty. Tourism and sugar were Cuba's largest industries by far, so many families from rural areas sent their young daughters to Havana to find employment in the tourism sector. Some got jobs as maids or nannies, but the most economically vulnerable of them often ended up working in sex work. [166]

Due to the ubiquity of sex workers in Havana, many tourists assumed any young Cuban woman in the city could be a prostitute. Prostitution was not outright illegal in Cuba, but was only tolerated in the Red Light districts. Many young Cuban women would often be arrested walking outside of Red Light districts by police, under the assumption they were prostitutes, and given limited opportunity to defend or explain themselves. While Cuban women, whether they were working in prostitution or not, were subject to objectification, violence, and punishment by law, the American male tourists involved in these interactions were never liable.

Hyatt Verill wrote for *Home and Garden* magazine that, "A certain amount of sin, naturally, is to be expected in a city as wholeheartedly devoted to love and romance as Havana"; Helen Lawrenson wrote that "Cuban air" had a "curious chemical effect on Anglo-Saxons,

[165] Ryan (164)
[166] Pérez, Louis A. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. 4th ed. Latin American Histories. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. (94)

dissolving their inhibitions and intensifying their libidos."[167] Much of this was through performances and appearances of women in certain roles. Dance clubs were a main attraction for Americans visiting Cuba. The most popular dance style performed at these cabarets was Rumba, a slow, sensual Latin dance filled with hip movement: a sexual pantomime. The Rumba—and all other Cuban dance styles—had rhythmic origins in Son, a fusion of Spanish melody and Afro-Cuban rhythm. [168] Upper-class Cubans detested the Rumba for its salaciousness, but Amercians adored it, who saw it as unlike anything they had encountered in the States. Shows at the dance clubs were often designed with Americans in mind, specifically, creating shock value and intrigue amongst tourists, rather than culturally significant or authentic dance tradition. These shows were so provocative to the uncontrolled American audience, that eventually Rumba dancers performed in glass cages to prevent unwanted touching from male spectators. [169]

Beyond the American tourists' fixation on the "provocative" Rumba, Cuban cabaret dancers were consistently fetishized and objectified. As written in a 1950s travel journal, "no costume is as beautiful as bronze skin… High yaller gal! Dancing to savage music, the breath of the jungle." [170] He referred to the dancer as a "high yaller" girl, which is a term with roots in Spanish colonial racial hierarchies, referring to a woman with white and black ancestry, but having lighter skin. The use of this highly-charged term to describe this dancer not only points to the imperial nature of American tourists in Cuba, but also highlights a fixation on her Latinness, equating it to savagery. Male American writers continued to write with a fixation on the ethnicity of dancers in Cuba. Historian Neill Macaulay wrote that about his time in Havana that, "the girls, all teenagers…were white and several blonde, though their eyes were unmistakably Latin." [171]

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[167] Pérez (189)
[168] Ibid. (198)
[169] Schwartz, Rosalie (126)
[170] Merrill (129)
[171] Pérez (194)

Another tourist records in *Terry's Guide* that, "courtesans varying in complexion from peach white to coal black; 15-year-old flappers and ebony antiques."[172] Dancers in Cuba, whether they had light or dark skin, were "othered" by American men at their shows. As Macaulay describes, the women he saw were presented almost entirely as white, and yet, he perceives there is something in their eyes that makes them more available to him, and certainly more inherently sexual.

VI. Liberty Parties: What Went on At Guantánamo Bay

When discussing the impact of American tourism in Cuba, it is necessary to consider Guantánamo Bay, where a permanent American military base housed American men and often their families for long-stretches of time, sometimes multiple years. Guantánamo Bay represented a unique part of the American presence in Cuba: not quite tourism, not quite occupation. Even contemporarily, it was confusing as to whether or not what was going on in Guantánamowas categorically "tourism." The Cuban government decidedly did not see Guantánamo Bay as a tourist destination, as The Cuban Ministry of Tourism denied Guantánamo's petition for tourism funding, continuing to pour money into Havana. Even if going unrecognized as tourism, American presence at Guantánamo Bay was heavily influenced by tourist behavior and marketing in Havana; Guantánamo Bay represented how tourism can become a lifestyle.

Guantánamo Bay had been under American dominion since June 6th, 1898, the day of the Battle of Guantánamo Bay, when American and Cuban military forces secured this very strategic port. From that day on, Guantánamo Bay remained an important stronghold within Cuba for the United States military. One of the provisions of the Platt Amendment was to establish a permanent American military base at Guantánamo Bay to give the United States the capability to militarily intervene in Cuba whenever necessary. However, in reality, this port was primarily put

[172] Merrill (129)

there to maintain American control of Cuban exports and an essential port for maintaining United States military dominance in the Caribbean. Certain legal aspects of the Cuba-United States relationship changed on paper in the 20th century, as Cuban leaders cycled in and out, but the American "lease" of Guantánamo Bay was consistently reaffirmed.

The base was updated and developed leading into the 1950s, with a large-scale renovation and construction of piers, railroads, docks, training centers, and water treatment plants in 1942. [173]As soldiers were offered more long-term placements at Guantánamo Bay in the 1950s, the creation of a quasi-American suburbia at the base created an uncanny separation between everyday American life on the base and the impoverished southeast coast of Cuba.

The Guantánamo Public Memory Project has conducted interviews with people who once resided in Guantánamo Bay throughout various periods of history. One of the interviews was done with Patricia Page, a native Floridian who lived on the base for three years while her father was stationed there as a leader for the naval Fleet Training Group, between 1954 and 1959. [174] She describes the home she lived in as spacious and similar to that of a house in the American suburbs: three bedrooms, a garage, den, a living room, and separate maids' quarters. She recalls her father organizing activities for himself and his training group off of the base, such as duck hunting at a nearby plantation. The owner of the plantation "really liked Americans," and invited Page and her family into their home for a meal. She recalls the living conditions of this Cuban family to be much different from hers: the house "had a mud floor… it was very sparsely furnished." Page reflects on feeling very grateful for her more privileged living situation compared to where native Cubans were living.

[173]McCoy, Mary Ellene Chenevey. "Guantanamo Bay: The United States Naval Base and Its Relationship with Cuba." ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1995. https://www.proquest.com/docview/304169292?pq-origsite=primo.
[174]"Guantánamo Public Memory Project – Stories." Accessed April 14, 2025. https://gitmomemory.org/stories/.

This echoes a similar sentiment expressed in another Guantánamo Public Memory Project interview with native Cuban Alberto Jones. Jones moved to Guantánamo for work when he was quite young and recalls the base as "one of the best designed towns in Cuba." [175] He describes how Americans brought a lot of their life in the States with them to Cuba: playing baseball and golf, having picnics, watching movies, and that they often unnecessarily prolonged their time in Guantánamo due to the "high quality of life…they lived in Guantánamo, they have their family on Guantánamo. They go on the base, they purchase things for pennies, and they come back."

Part of the appeal to seek work in Guantánamo Bay was the often higher wages offered to maids and maintenance workers than in other parts of Cuba. [176] However, the higher wages came with the price of poor treatment from American patrons. Guantánamo Bay operated within a sort of legal gray-zone, where it was not clear whether or not American or Cuban law ought to be followed. The Americans in charge at the base often got to cherry-pick when they followed American law versus when they followed Cuban law. For example, 1950s leadership at Guantánamo Bay initially followed the Cuban standard for annual leave seeing as it gave less time off, only to switch to using the American standard a few years later once Cuban law changed and became more lenient than American law. [177] This kind of legal manipulation represents an unfair power dynamic between Americans and Cubans, actions that would likely be considered in violation of international law, if not for this strange sort-of colonial state of affairs around the base.

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[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Lipman, Jana K. *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 2009. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnm8n. (62)

Other accounts paint the wives of American soldiers to take advantage of the Cuban women working for them, such as the story of Rosa Johnson, a young lady who moved to the base in search of work due to the lack of opportunity in her hometown. In an interview with Jana K. Lipman for the book *Guantánamo: A Working Class History Between Empire and Revolution*, Johnson reports that the mistress of the house left her to tend to the children and clean the house, while paying her very little and ignoring Rosa's promised time off. [178] In *the Living Conditions at the U.S. Naval Base* Guide, the wives and their soldier husbands were encouraged to believe the low wage of their maids was more than enough and to avoid "spoiling them with extra gratuities" and that "if you allow too much freedom to your maid, you do her a disservice as well as the next Navy wife who might hire her." [179] This treatment of Cuban people by American residents was particularly cruel, and shows how Americans had gotten quite comfortable treating Cuban people as lesser in the simulation of American suburbia at Guantánamo.

If one was unable to secure employment at Guantánamo, it was suggested to find work in the nearby city of Caimanera, the nearby city where American soldiers and sailors were known to run amuck when given time off. These days of mass-debauchery from American soldiers were called "liberty parties", where soldiers en masse were given "liberty" or time-off, and would enter these cities for a few nights, frequenting bars and brothels. While Guantánamo Bay maintained a reputation as a place of "harmony, peace, clear waters, vibrant citizens, and spiritual serenity," Caimanera gained the reputation as the dirtiest city in Cuba. [180] These neighboring cities both had the same primary clientele, and yet, their reputations could not be more different. This mirrors directly the relationship between the tourism dynamic between the

[178] Lipman (101)
[179] Ibid. (101)
[180] Ibid. (108)

United States and Cuba overall: the soldiers got their bad behavior out of the way in Caimanera so they would not feel like misbehaving at Guantánamo Bay, which was decidedly "theirs."

One of the most notorious aspects of the "liberty parties" was the spread of sexually-transmitted venereal diseases. This had been rising since the end of World War II, depicted in a1946 chart with lists of reported cases of venereal diseases passed onto American soldiers by prostitutes. The men's ages ranged from 18-23 and the ages of the women ranging from 16-35, with information on the womens' heights, builds, hair colors, place they encountered the soldiers, and how they "procured" her, either by "pimp" or "self." There was space for the woman's name, but the soldiers were able to maintain anonymity on these forms. This information was certainly collected more for protecting American soldiers and letting them know which brothels, pimps, or women themselves to avoid while on liberty, rather than drawing attention to a serious health issue. The protection of American reputation and the acceptance of awful behavior from American men continued: reports of drunk U.S. soldiers as "half-savages," going into "whatever house [they wanted] were ignored because the amount of money spent by Americans in those cities 'was what interested many people.'" [181] Only in Cuban publications were there reports of what seemed to be typical American behavior: "habitual drunkenness… brawling in public places…arrogance," as reported by Libertad, a paper based in Santiago de Cuba. [182]

The situation at Guantánamo Bay represented a version of Cuba fully at the mercy of American tourists, utilized completely for American tourism, and perhaps how things could have progressed outside of Guantánamo and Caimanera had Fidel Castro's revolution been delayed or never materialized. Given that American misbehavior seemed to be the most fraught at the base,

[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid.

it seems to be no coincidence that the nucleus of Castro's Revolution was in the hills of Oriente, adjacent to Guantánamo. [183] There was the "Cactus Curtain": rows of cacti and palm trees separating Guantánamo Bay and rural, working-class Oriente. As tensions between American depravity, frustration over tourism, and ultimately, most of Cuba's exclusion from one of its primary industries exploded, the "Cactus Curtain" descended, and the Cuban Revolution started to gain momentum.

[183]"Chapter Nine - The History of Guantanamo Bay," June 29, 2001. https://web.archive.org/web/20010629003730/http://gtmo.net/gazz/HISCHP9.HTM.

Conclusion

On March 23rd, 1958, the Havana Hilton held its grand opening with a gala of unprecedented glamor and grandeur. The Havana Hilton, the tallest building in Latin America at the time, towered over a city that had been filled with many newly constructed hotels over the last few decades, especially in the 1950s. In front of American celebrities, businessmen and the reigning Miss Minnesota, CEO of the Hilton Company Conrad Hilton gave a toast in the air-conditioned hotel ballroom. He recalled his initial hesitation to open the hotel in Cuba, as alongside the increased travel to Havana, reports of unfair gambling, deviant sex, and other less-than-savory behavior associated with American tourist behavior and thus Havana itself, made him question whether this country was worth his investment. However, upon arrival, he knows he made the right choice, echoing the words of Cuba's initial "discoverer" Christopher Columbus, when he described Cuba in one of his journals in 1492 as "the most beautiful land human eyes have ever seen".[184] He ended his speech likening himself and his hotel chain to that of the Conquistador himself: "I am very happy today that four hundred and sixty six years later, Hilton Hotels has discovered Cuba".

The hotel cost 24 million dollars to construct, and it planned to fill its 588 rooms and 42 suites year-round with Americans looking to experience the hot sun, thrilling casinos, beachside relaxation, sensual nightlife and unadulterated fun they were told Cuba would offer them. But this would never come to pass.

The luxurious hotel would only have its doors open for mere months until it permanently closed for business when Fidel Castro successfully launched a coup on Batista's government.

[184] When Castro seized the HiltonFilmakers Library, inc., production company.; Frameline (Firm), production company.; Olav, Bente, producer.; Thoresen, Bjarte, director. New York, NY : Filmakers Library, 2010

Castro installed himself as President on January 1st, 1959, and quickly set up his office on the top floor of the Havana Hilton, which he renamed to the Havana Libre. He operated out of room 2324 - the Continental Suite - where Castro would conduct his business, speak to the press, and meet with leaders from other countries, all in the building that was meant to be the magnum opus of American influence in Cuba.[185] The tourism industry certainly took a hit, as Americans were no longer as welcome nor interested in visiting Cuba. The next few years saw the complete deterioration of the American-Cuban relationship, from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, to Castro's ties to the Soviet Union, and finally, the full embargo placed on Cuba by the Kennedy administration.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, tourism kept booming. The industry in the 1960s maintained its momentum from the previous decades, building more hotels, welcoming 11% more international arrivals than in the decade prior, and even hosted the 1968 Summer Olympic Games.[186] Cuba's Golden Age of Tourism ended in a fiery blaze, and the culmination of a revolution that altered the history of Cuba forever. Meanwhile, resorts in Mexico stayed open.

The first chapter covered the start of the Mexican and Cuban mass tourism industries during Prohibition in the United States. While both Cuba and Mexico had complicated histories with the United States, Mexico's was significantly more contentious and competitive. Cuba was in America's back pocket, whereas the Mexican Revolution and growing resentment towards American influence in Mexico created an uncomfortable tension between the two countries, and led many people to see Mexico (and Mexicans) as dangerous. However, the opportunity to enrich

[185]Perur, Srinath. "The Habana Libre Hotel, Pawn in Castro's Battle against the US - a History of Cities in 50 Buildings, Day 34." *The Guardian*, May 12, 2015, sec. Cities. https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/12/havana-habana-libre-castro-cuba-us-history-cities-50-buildings-day-34.

[186]Park, Chloe. "The Abandonment of Indigenous Mexico Through Tourism Development in the 1960s." LACS 76/HIST 87 (Winter 2022): Culture and Identity in Modern Mexico. Accessed April 14, 2025. https://course-exhibits.library.dartmouth.edu/s/modernmexico/page/park.

the country through tourism was too tempting to pass up, however it happened more so out of an understanding of that opportunity by Mexican tourism officials rather than it being their only option. Tourism was seen as a way to enrich Mexico and celebrate their culture, and additionally as a way to correct misconceptions about Mexican people themselves.

However, Cuba took things in the opposite direction, deciding to be whatever Americans wanted Havana to be. The mythologized Havana bar scene became emblematic of Cuba in the American gaze, and without any correction from Cuban tourism officials, Americans ran with this assumption, seeing Havana as the best place to get a drink. When this niche grew old, Cuban tourism officials pushed forward with establishing Havana as a city of sin, developing industries for sex-tourism and high-stakes gambling by the time the 1950s came around. While Cuba leaned into negative stereotypes of their citizens to please their American guests, Mexico did not feed into or transcend stereotypes placed on them by Americans, rather, Mexicans redefined themselves in the name of the Mexican Revolution, using tourism to show off this new identity to the world.

The second chapter covers the state of American tourism in Mexico in the 1950s. While leadership in Mexico continuously leaned more conservative after the 1920s, the prioritization of Mexican culture remained at the core of the country's tourism strategy, even though the commercialization of indigeneity had the adverse effect of condensing Mexico's vast indigenous heritage into a homogeneous reference. Mexico's tourism industry in the 1950s could best be summarized as a balance between pleasing American tourists and staying true to Mexican autonomy in their country. The construction of many highways throughout Mexico made travel more accessible to a wider American population and spurred Mexican tours which brought lucrative tourism industries to many regions in the country, increasing nationwide support and

satisfaction for this industry. Acapulco rose to prominence as the definitive beachtown in the era, however, national initiatives to prepare Acapulco for American guests expecting modernized accommodations in the town meant sacrificing the wellbeing of Acapulqueños, revealing that short-term profit was often prioritized over the well-being of citizens. By building up Mexico as a cosmopolitan, intriguingly foreign "Faraway Land Nearby" Mexico never made it seem they would bend to American's expectations, and so Americans never expected them to.

The third chapter covers Cuba's tourism industry and the 1950s under the leadership of Fulegncio Batista. The chapter begins with a section which interrogates Batista's motives for pushing the envelope in so many aspects of the tourism industry: inviting gangsters in exile to run high-stakes gambling in the casinos, approving huge hotel construction projects by American companies, and focusing all of his energy on an industry that catered to outsiders, and isolates his citizens. While certainly it can be argued that Batista's disregard of the greater Cuban population outside of Havana fueled his actions, a survey of his past before his presidency reveals the fundamental belief behind his actions: he did not believe Cuba would survive without unequivocal approval of the United States. For this same reason, Batista undermined his previous alignment with Cuban nationalist movements, curtailing the progress of this movement in favor of proritizing the American tourist experience.

However, this positioning of Cuba as nearly American-by-proxy wore old quickly, and Americans began to lament how similar Cuba was to their home country. Tourism continued, with Havana being known as the place to get your fill of drinking, gambling, and sex before returning to the United States, reputation unscathed. The example of Guantánamo Bay reveals how the marketing of Cuba as an American playground had extensive consequences, as American behavior and treatment of Cubans at Guantánamo Bay was explicitly cruel and

destructive. There, tourism had become a lifestyle, and thus American tourists were galvanized to indulge in pleasures and disregard Cuban people and culture year-round.

This research concludes that tourism must be done with prioritization of a country's autonomy and self-determination, or else the industry will ultimately fail. The choice of the immediate gratification of an immediately accepted and successful tourism industry in Havana through bending to American interest and influence meant their industry grew quicker than Mexico and endeared Cuban leaders to the Yankees. But willingness to please Americans took away the mystery and allure of the "foreign" aspects of Cuba that motivated Americans to participate in tourism in the first place. It is not to say though, that Cuba's strategy did not make sense, as pleasing Americans seemed like the quickest route to stability in the country.

Social tensions were not exacerbated in the same way in Mexico, as the inclusion of many regions in the country into the tourism industry, as well as small ways they maintained their agency over how Americans viewed them: making it clear that Mexico City residents were the tourism trendsetters, not Americans, to carving out ways to display local culture to visiting guests and thus having control over what is considered "authentic" Mexican-ness to its visitors, meant Americans could never conclusively make assumptions or judgements on Mexican culture, history or people. The diverse tourism industry reminded them that there is so much to see and experience in the country. It put Mexico on equal footing with the U.S., rather than in their pocket.

Ultimately, tourism and nationalism have this fascinating correlation: in Mexico, tourism and nationalism fused to create an industry which represented Mexicans on their own terms and created a profitable industry without the same exploitation found in Havana. In Cuba, nationalism was suppressed, and even in some ways, denied, as American-centric tourism could

not coexist with Cuban nationalism. Perhaps this is why the Cuban nationalist movement under Castro all but exterminated tourism. Unless you fuze the goals of nationalism and tourism together, one cannot exist with the other.

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