CHAPTER ONE

CULTURAL TOURISM IN LATIN AMERICA:
AN INTRODUCTION

Michiel Baud and Annelou Ypeij

Tourism—‘voluntary, temporary travel for rest or recreation,’ as Lynn Meisch defines it in this volume—is an increasingly important source of income for both states and local populations in Latin America. It can be seen as an integrated element of globalization in which international travel and cultural discovery have become part of global consumption patterns. In regions that have a large indigenous population (basically the Andean highlands and Central America), tourism growth primarily concerns ‘cultural tourism,’ whereby the indigenous (and to a lesser extent, Spanish colonial and republican) heritage and customs form the principle tourist attractions. As a complement to global tourism, national and regional tourism has also become increasingly important in Latin America. This is a result of an increasingly affluent middle class and a growing awareness of, and admiration for, the indigenous past among national politicians and populations.

Cultural tourism does not take place in enclaves or far-away resorts, but in Latin American societies and among populations themselves. It reaches the core of local societies and confronts them with unprecedented influxes of people, influences and investments. This book is not so much about cultural tourism as about its complex and often ambiguous consequences at the local level. The contributing authors look at these consequences in the Andes and in Central America, where (mostly foreign) tourists arrive with the explicit purpose of connecting to indigenous cultures, in the form of both their material traces (heritage) and the people who carry that real or supposed culture. They see tourism as a force in which the global and the local coalesce, and as such as a privileged field of study of the effects and local expressions of globalization. The issues this book examines are the implications of cultural tourism on local societies, when and how these tourist activities are integrated into local societies, and how successful these efforts have been in the long run.
Tourism in Latin America

Tourism in Latin America became a mass activity from the late 1960s onwards, as a consequence of cheaper air travel and the establishment of large beach resorts (Mowfort et al. 2008: 13–14). The tourists who booked their holidays at these resorts were attracted by the promise of sun, sand, sea and (possibly) sex. They could enjoy these under rather luxurious circumstances and without much awareness of daily life outside the resorts. In the same period, cruise-ship tourism started to blossom in the Caribbean.

In addition to these organized forms of tourism, ‘backpack tourism’ emerged. Starting in the early 1970s, backpackers and hippies began to explore Latin America in an individual way. In search of remote and ‘authentic’ places, they left the beaten track and set off on adventurous journeys. By doing so, they opened up the routes that had first been explored at the beginning of the twentieth century by anthropologists and other researchers who wanted to do in situ research in the indigenous heartlands of Latin America (Beals 1976; Baud 2003; Mendoza, this volume). These backpackers were the first tourists to explore exotic cultures and discover new tourist sites. Nowadays, past and present traces of indigenous culture comprise one of the continent’s main tourist attractions. Each year, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit such areas as Peru’s Sacred Valley (whose principal attraction is the ruins of Machu Picchu) or the Yucatán Peninsula in southern Mexico.1

Many Latin American governments regard tourism as consistent with the neoliberal economic development agenda: tourism opens up new markets, generates foreign currency and creates employment. It also adds economic value to the continent’s abundant but previously unexploited resources, such as its warm climate, natural beauty, interesting cultures and heritage from many eras. And indeed, tourism has turned into a booming sector: while in 1950 some 1.3 million tourists visited Latin America and the Caribbean, by 1980 this figure was 18 million and in 2006 it reached more than 45 million. Tourism receipts rose from USD 392 million in 1950 to USD 13 billion in 1980, and

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1 Between 1997 and 2006, the number of tourists visiting the Inca archaeological site of Machu Picchu each year rose from 294,032 to 691,623 (www.Mincetur.gob.pe, accessed September 2008).