



## TOURISTS AND LOCALS

The people of Mazatlán, Mexico, have many reasons for welcoming visitors.

TRACY DUVALL

In 1996, I moved to Mazatlán to perform ethnographic fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> Mazatlán is a city on Mexico's Pacific coast, whose more than 300,000 people live mainly from the intertwined industries of tourism, fishing, government work and narcotics trafficking.

Soon after my arrival, I gave a lecture at the state university. I repeated the common sense then current in the social sciences: locals resented tourists and the restrictions erected to keep locals from spoiling tourists' experience; locals expressed moral suspicion of those who worked among, socialized with, or acted like tourists; and the only desirable way for locals to deal with tourists was to exploit them. I could have added that tourism threatened local, traditional cultures.<sup>2</sup>

I soon realized that I was mostly wrong. One of the benefits of living somewhere for a long time is that the obvious becomes obvious.

Around the same time as my lecture, I had lunch with two women who were quite critical of tourism's influence on local culture. However, they insisted that they were in a tiny minority fighting for a lost cause. Later, a prominent leftist – an active friend of the Zapatistas and of foreign tourists – dismissed my critique that tourism fostered dependency: Mazatlán had no alternatives.

Mazatlecos (locals) seemed more concerned with how to increase the influx of tourists. A motor-oil distributor suggested that Mazatlán needed to bribe federal of-

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ficials in order to attract government investments in tourism development. A low-income bartender told me that she appreciated drug trafficking, since money laundering underwrote so many tourism-oriented businesses.

In short, most of the Mazatlecos I interviewed wanted more tourists and tourism. Their eager embrace of tourism as a path to affluence and modernity resulted from and perpetuated a continuing history of foreign domination, which, of course, some Mazatlecos complained about. But few suggested a preferable alternative.

Although most tourists in Mazatlán were Mexican, Mazatlecos talked most about the young tourists, Los College, from the United States and Canada. Mazatlán also hosted numerous foreign retirees and a fair number of visiting families. The main attractions were the fabulous beaches,

discos, restaurants, fishing and low prices.

The benefit from tourism that Mazatlecos mentioned most readily in conversation or public discourse was money. One estimate is that one-sixth of the economically active population was employed directly in tourism (e.g., in hotels) and one-half indirectly (e.g., in fishing).<sup>3</sup> And many tourism enterprises, including several large hotels, were locally owned. However, Mazatlecos told me that wages were not necessarily higher in tourist areas but that they still preferred to work there, for money was not tourism's only attraction.

With tourists comes entertainment. Tourism brought many more venues for leisure to Mazatlán. Unfortunately, the tourist-oriented discos, bars, and restaurants were relatively expensive, so Mazatlecos crowded the few spots that tolerated loitering customers and had no cover charge. Then they packed more-expensive tourist venues on special occasions, such as Mother's Day.

The tourists themselves were amusing to watch or to interact with. Many invited this attention, zipping around in open-air taxis, yelling, "Woooo!" or boating along the coast in "The Party Yacht," yelling, "Woooo!" Others could be seen along the beach, sunning themselves, soaking their judgment in beer, reading books, dancing expressively, parasailing, looking attractive, barfing, playing sports, talking with vendors, and so on. At night, locals could watch tourists or interact with them as they drank and danced in restaurants and nightclubs or tried to have sex on the beach. Quite a few men told me of their delight in "looking at the gringas."

In addition, tourists served educational purposes. Not only did they help with second-language acquisition; they also modeled different ways of living. A woman noticed how much Americans love animals, since so many went out of their way to be friendly to dogs. A poor, alcoholic man appreciated Americans' egalitarian friendliness, recounting how a veteran sat next to him on a park bench and chatted with him.

Fittingly, Mazatlecos also learned from tourists about going on vacation. A surprisingly large number – including beach vendors – vacationed at beach resorts, especially La Paz and Acapulco. They reported acting much like foreign tourists did in Mazatlán.

Of course, they also learned things that they considered to be negative. For example, some young women criticized American teens' overemphasis on sex. Nonetheless, quite a few parents not only allowed, but encouraged their kids to hang out in the Golden Zone, the city's main

## Exploring Ecotourism in Three Communities

Three masters students share their research experiences with Alternatives.

### Local Enthusiasm for Ecotourism in Quijos River Valley, Ecuador



Chaurette

Ecotourism has evolved into a buzzword, explains Eric Chaurette, but it can have concrete benefits for some remote communities. Chaurette spent four months doing research on tourism in a remote community in the Quijos River Valley, on the eastern side of the Ecuadorian Andes. Chaurette discovered an "overwhelming interest in tourism" among the residents who "saw it as being a very positive force of change for their community," improving community health, bringing better communication systems, and stabilizing land use. In an area suffering from deforestation due to an economy dependent on dairy farming, some farmers have begun to set aside land to reap some of the economic benefits from

ecotourism. These private land plots create corridors and buffer zones for the government-owned protected areas that are in close proximity. Chaurette observes that these "private parks can be more important for providing ecotourism opportunities" because the public land lacks the infrastructure to accommodate tourists that private landowners have been able to afford. His study has already been integrated into the Quijos Township Development Plan.

### Ecotourism Viable Alternative for Once Heavily Logged Hainan

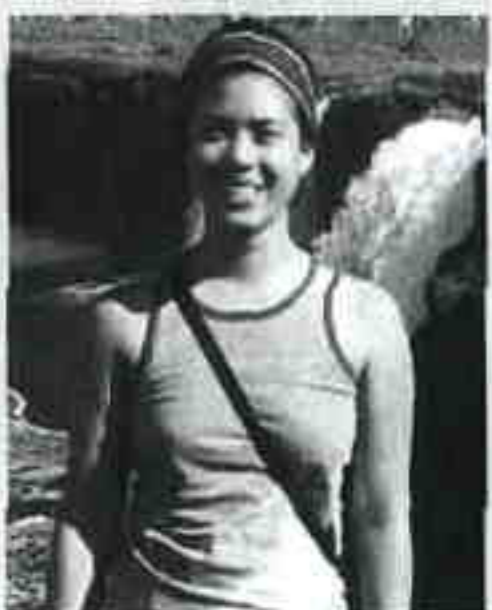


Stone (left)

Mike Stone is studying the relationships between ecotourism, parks and rural communities in the province of Hainan, a tropical island in the South China Sea. His research focuses on how two protected parks in remote areas, once heavily logged, are now turning to ecotourism as a result of a logging ban. Eager to determine how the ecotourism industry is developing in these parks and how local residents felt about the move to tourism, Stone travelled to Hainan to conduct interviews. Like Chaurette, Stone found a general sense of optimism among local residents, in this case even despite the infancy of ecotourism in the area. Locals had the impression that tourism will bring benefits to the area, yet Stone says it is

too early to determine what the impacts will be on the parks and communities. Adopting a bottom-up approach, Stone hopes to convey the communities' views for ecotourism to those officially managing the parks. Ultimately, Stone thinks it is important that his research "makes a difference at the community level."

### Samoan EcoTour Guides Face Challenges on the Job



Causing

Christine Causing interviewed tourist guides to find out what ecotourism might mean in a developing country. Travelling to Samoa, a remote island located in the middle of the South Pacific, Causing learned about the many challenges guides face, including a lack of formal training, limited English language skills, conflicts between balancing the job in tourism with family commitments and religious values, and problems managing culturally inappropriate tourist behaviour. Even though the Samoan guides were unfamiliar with the term "ecotourism", Causing believes their familiarity with the land and ecologically based culture means there is significant potential for their tourism practices to "positively influence

the natural and cultural environment." Having undertaken one of the first studies on ecotourism in Samoa, Causing hopes that her work will interest the Tourism Council of the South Pacific.

Eric Chaurette, Mike Stone and Christine Causing are all masters students in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at the University of Waterloo and recipients of the Innovative Research Award funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The faculty launched its Tourism Policy and Planning program in September 2002. ☐

Kelly Loverock is a student in Environment and Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo, Ontario.

tourist area.

Some Mazatlecos took advantage of tourism contexts to play with their identities. In one night I met a girl "from Torreón" and a group of guys "from Monterrey"; it eventually became obvious that they all were locals.

More common were Mazatlecos who felt that the tourism environment licensed relatively "open" behaviour. Tourists often feel freer because they escape from everyday routines and from long-term social surveillance.<sup>4</sup> In addition, tourists get slack just because they're expected to be less responsible. Many Mazatlecos wanted to feel the same freedom simply by visiting the Golden Zone. For example, a woman named Angela wanted to move our date from a local context, where she felt the judgment of local society, to the tourism zone, where she acted considerably more carefree.

Some Mazatlecos saw tourism as an opportunity for more lasting changes. A greeter outside a Western-themed steakhouse told me that, when she was a child, a tourist family had taken her to live temporarily in Colorado. And, of course, stories of marriages (and divorces) between locals and foreign tourists were legion. Most commonly, Mazatlecos expressed amazement that affluent, attractive young women from the United States and Canada would marry the uncouth, womanizing beach vendors. In contrast, a couple of young men who worked on the beach longed to continue their relationships with older foreign women. And some local women – including married ones – made little secret of their hunt for a husband in the Golden Zone.

Some locals also took advantage of tourism to level inequalities through negative actions: by robbing, humiliating, or mocking tourists. For example, a man with a social-science degree justified robbing tourists by claiming that he was taking back what the United States had stolen from Mexico. And many workers publicly mocked tourists, directly or behind their backs, for other locals' amusement.

Examining only current practices, we might infer that tourism is colonizing local culture. But Mazatlán has hosted prestigious foreigners since long before tourism development took off in the 1950s. And Mazatlecos of all classes have preferred foreign fashion for over a century. Nineteenth-century newspapers were filled with advertisements for foreign goods. One such ad, for a store named The People's Voice, reads: "Items of latest fashion are received with each steamship. ... Buy CHEAP, VERY CHEAP."<sup>5</sup>

Mazatlecos' local traditions have not

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Judie Cukier, Director, Tourism Policy and Planning Program, Faculty of Environmental Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1  
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been "folk-glorified" via tourism. Thinking - like other locals - that foreign and Mexican visitors were mostly interested in Indians and haute culture, local tour operators hired mariachis and indigenous performers from other parts of Mexico and ran tours highlighting historic signs of elite culture, such as a restored theater. In contrast, Mazatlecos perceived most of their own "typical" practices to be, like themselves, working-class and non-Indian - and therefore inappropriate as tourist attractions. For example, many Mazatlecos saw the local music and dance styles as guilty pleasures or outright embarrassments.

These attitudes resulted from an intertwined history of foreign domination and local social divisions. They have been basic to local culture for a long time. Fittingly, one of Mazatlán's cherished emblems is Pacifico beer, which German merchants founded there a century ago.

It's hard to balance tourism's account. It makes Mazatlán directly dependent on global economic fluctuations, as do drug trafficking and large-scale fishing. And the focus on tourism development, like Mazatlecos' preference for international linkages in general, derives partly from a questionable logic: that greater involvement with rich, modern countries will make Mazatlán richer and more modern. Still, it is difficult to imagine an alternative that would replace, rather than complement, tourism. And at least tourism increases local diversity and changes the lives and opportunities of local people in ways that most welcome. Tourism is for local consumption, too. ■

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the full treatment, see T. Duvall, "Moral Compromises: Embracing 'Tradition' and 'Modernity' in Mazatlán" (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1998, unpublished PhD dissertation).

<sup>2</sup> For example: S. Lavie, *The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity Under Arab and Egyptian Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> "Acerca de Mazatlán: Economía" <ecu.maz.uasnet.mx/mazatlan/anteecon.htm> (date accessed: May 10, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For example, U. Wagner, "Out of Time and Place: Mass Tourism and Charter Trips," *Ethnos*, 42 (1977), pp. 38-52.

<sup>5</sup> La Voz del Pueblo [The People's Voice] ad in *El Occidental* (March 3, 1879).

### Follow Up

For studies that found positive local attitudes toward tourism in Hungary and among the Maori see [www.geocities.com/Paris/9842/impacts.html](http://www.geocities.com/Paris/9842/impacts.html) and [www2.auckland.ac.nz/maori/jhmr/docs/Tourism\\_Attitudes\\_Muriwhenua\\_1999.ps.pdf](http://www2.auckland.ac.nz/maori/jhmr/docs/Tourism_Attitudes_Muriwhenua_1999.ps.pdf).