2015

A Dichotomy of Cultures

Davis, Pier Amelia

http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/120412
A Dichotomy of Cultures

The Nature of Jamaican Resort Development

Pier Amelia Davis
Master of Urban Planning, 2015
A
n abundance of private resorts and luxurious
destinations have cropped up across
Jamaica and most of the Caribbean over
the last several decades. As the demand for and
subsequent development of these gated resorts
increase, the potential for economic dependence
and marginalization of native peoples can
increase as well. Decades of resort-based tourism
and cruise liners shuttling Westerns throughout
the Caribbean offer proof that the promises from
international organizations of modernization and
local jobs come with a hidden price tag. Droves
of middle- and upper-class Westerners flock en
masse to these resort destinations, bringing with
them negative externalities that extend far beyond
fiscal woes: disenfranchised local businesses and
a society segregated along a series of borders and
hinges. Advocates and activists in Jamaica and its
neighboring countries have long cautioned against
this particular brand of tourism. V.S. Naipaul, a
noted Caribbean writer, has gone so far as to call it
a ‘new slavery’ (Gibson, 2014, p.340).

Across the Caribbean, countries are facing similar
struggles brought about by the rise of luxury
resorts and the particular brand of tourism these
resorts market. The islands too often lack the
national agency or will to implement policies
that regulate the sort of unchecked development
created as a result of the current tourism paradigm.
Furthermore, CARICOM, the regional planning
organization in the Caribbean, has not been able
to effect plans that address the externalities of the
industry.

As economic growth and development in the
region are closely linked to the tourist industry –
tourism brought $850 million to the region in 2000
– Caribbean countries often seem to be competing
against each other to attract the newest resort,
port, or crowd of holidaymakers (Gibson, 2014,
p.342). For the most part, this competition has not
bred innovation; rather it seems to create a race
to the bottom, draining communities of resources
in efforts to lure the largest resort developments,
amplifying a stagnant form of tourism. Without the
necessary leadership, island nations struggle to
prevent the erosion of delicate cultural and natural
systems. As islands invest in the false promises of
a bright future through mass tourism, one is left
to question the effectiveness of economic growth
when the capacity to create a sustainable, equitable
future is missing.
In the eyes of tourists and developers, Jamaica, with its famous cultural icons and several hundred miles of development-worthy beachfront, stands apart from its island neighbors. And Montego Bay, on the northwestern coast, offers some of the best luxury resort destinations on the island.

Half Moon Resort, an all-inclusive destination and one of the oldest resorts in Montego Bay, offers an escape to paradise for those who can afford the high price tag. Walls extending into the ocean and guarded gates enclose these private resorts, creating a hard border that divides two different Jamaicas.
Resort culture has rapidly altered the Caribbean landscape. Public beaches have always provided a market for local businesses, but in recent years, the effects of unbridled resort development and private beaches have harmed beach communities such as this one. Jacob Taylor Beach, once a successful fishing town with small shops and food stops, has experienced economic decline following nearby private development. The construction of a wall divides the existing community from the newcomers, with each side representing two disparate ways of life.
In contrast to the authentic public beaches, resorts offer duty-free shopping villages selling mass-produced Jamaican culture and restaurants cooking foods imported for American and European palates. Resort tourism is breeding a neocolonialism in which Jamaica, along with other countries, exports agriculture it does not consume or process and imports foods it does not grow (McCook, 1996). And locals will tell you that the increase of resorts in Montego Bay forced many well-established restaurants and businesses to close.
Tourism has been marketed as a catalyst to help move countries like Jamaica into the 21st century, but this modernization appears to be selectively dispersed. The nature of the development of these resort destinations creates a polarizing spatial fabric in the coastal communities of Jamaica – a checkerboard of haves and have-nots. This separation of people by socio-economic backgrounds, statuses, races, and experiences seems to further segregate society.
To remain competitive with Caribbean neighbors, countries offer financial incentives to attract foreign investment and travelers. Duty-free shopping is offered in the resorts as one such incentive, but decades of not collecting sales taxes have taken their toll on the host countries. Since foreign companies own many of these resorts, the World Bank estimates that as much as 80 percent of tourism revenue does not stay in the country (Gibson, 2014, p.344). Despite the long-term negative effects and cultural and economic malaise, these countries have become dependent on the jobs the tourist industry creates.
The duty-free shopping may be alluring to tourists, but the reality of Jamaica not receiving taxes from resort business takes shape in degrading public services. As bus stations and roads deteriorate, access to local communities decreases, further reducing local business consumption and sales tax revenue. The negative symptoms of foreign-owned resorts and duty-free shopping seem to outweigh the national benefits of Jamaica’s resort culture, suggesting that a reevaluation of regional planning efforts may be in order.
REFERENCES
