

"The Only Risk is Wanting to Stay": Mediating Risk in Colombian Tourism Development

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Abstract

Like many other nations around the world, Colombia is currently pursuing increased international tourism as a strategy for (sustainable) development. Yet while the nation possesses numerous attributes, both natural and cultural, conducive to tourism development, its ability to capitalize on this potential is presently compromised by the legacy of its protracted internal conflict, which has solidified its global reputation as an extremely hazardous destination and led to numerous international warnings against traveling in the country. In an effort to ostensibly end the conflict and restore order to society, the Colombian government has engaged in an aggressive internal security campaign intended, in part, to make the country safe for foreign tourists. In conjunction with this effort, Colombian tourism authorities recently launched a new media campaign centered on the ingenious slogan "Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay." In this representation, I suggest, the tourism bureau is attempting to construct a "public secret" (something generally known but not explicitly articulated; Taussig, 1998a) enabling tourists to feel simultaneously safe and at risk without acknowledging the inconsistency between these perceptions, a dynamic that elsewhere I describe as intrinsic to the successful delivery of commercial adventure tourism in general (Fletcher, 2010). The relative success of this effort, as evidenced by the dramatic growth in international tourism arrivals to Colombia over the last several years, has important implications for our understanding of tourism marketing in general, as well as for other conflict-ridden nations also seeking to harness tourism development in the interest of economic recovery.

Introduction

Tourism, it is commonly claimed, is now competing with oil production for bragging rights as the world's largest industry (UNWTO, 2009). According to the UN's World Tourism

Organization, from 1950 to 2008 international tourism arrivals grew from 25 to 922 million generating US\$ 944 billion in total receipts, representing an average annual expansion of around 4% per year (UNWTO, 2009). Greenwood (1989: 171) goes so far as to call tourism the “largest scale movement of goods, services, and people that humanity has perhaps ever seen.” Notwithstanding the recent downturn in the global economy, this impressive growth is projected to continue into the foreseeable future, reaching an estimated nearly 1.6 billion international travelers by 2020 (UNWTO, 2009).

As in most other nations, Colombian authorities hope to harness this largesse as a driving force for national economic development (Brodzinsky, 2006). In support of this effort, in 2008 Proexport Colombia, the national export commission, in conjunction with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, launched a new advertizing campaign around the innovative slogan, “Colombia, the only risk is wanting to stay” (Proexport, 2010a). This slogan, of course, is explicitly intended to address the nation’s longstanding reputation as “South America’s most dangerous country” (Brodzinsky, 2006), a substantial deterrent for many potential visitors. As the campaign’s website describes,

The campaign was created as a response to the great deal of questions raised at international fairs concerning the risks involved in visiting Colombia. From there, rose the idea of facing the problem of lack of knowledge about Colombia and changing the negative perception the world could have by underlining the positive. The goal of the campaign is to present Colombia to international tourists as a vacation alternative by showing that the only risk in coming is to fall in love with its landscapes, people, food, fairs, festivals, handicrafts, colors, and all the experiences the country can offer a tourist. (Proexport, 2010b).

The campaign is “based on the testimonials of nine foreigners who came to Colombia for a short time and decided to stay for good” (ibid.) and is currently promoted in 15 countries including the US, Germany, and the UK.

In this article, I analyze this attempt to mediate representations of risk in the interest of Colombian tourism development. I suggest that, through this ingenious new slogan and similar representations, tourism promoters are attempting to create what anthropologist Michael Taussig calls a “public secret” of Colombia’s quite violent past, reassuring potential visitors that this violence is indeed a thing of the past while simultaneously and paradoxically reinforcing awareness of the potential for (continued) violence by obliquely referring to it in the slogan itself. As a result, the campaign encourages potential visitors to feel that they are at once both safe and at risk, a dynamic that I have contended elsewhere is central to the general success of adventure tourism (Fletcher, 2010), a market segment that Colombia appears quite eager to tap.

I begin by outlining Colombia’s emerging campaign to develop its tourism industry, particularly in terms of ecotourism as a form of ostensibly sustainable development. I then describe the chief impediment to this process, namely, Colombia’s long history of violent internal conflict and the contribution of this to pervasive and persistent images of the country as a savage place of chaos, disorder, and darkness. Following this, I discuss the government’s heavy-handed approach to addressing this impediment by working to make the country safe for tourism (as well as other activities) through a strategy I call “fortress tourism.” Subsequently, I turn to analysis of the tourism promotion campaign intended to address all of this, demonstrating the seemingly contradictory representations its promotional slogan conveys—a paradox reinforced by other dynamics of tourism development within the country as well. I conclude by discussing the implications of this analysis for our understanding of tourism marketing in general.

This study is based on a brief period of preliminary research conducted in the Colombia’s Caribbean region in July 2009 to assess the feasibility of a larger project addressing ecotourism development that I hope to undertake in the near future. As part of

this initial research I participated in a week-long workshop with representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations throughout the region, organized by the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, to discuss the feasibility of harnessing ecotourism as a strategy for sustainable development (described further below). In addition, I visited a number of tourism destinations ranging from long-established sites such as Cartagena, Santa Marta, and Parque Nacional Natural Tayrona to others just beginning their initial planning stages. The bulk of the analysis, however, derives from secondary literature as well as a semiotic and discursive analysis of tourism promotion rhetoric and images via a wide range of print and visual media.

Waiting for Ecotourism

As part of the aggressive internal security campaign upon which Colombia has embarked in recent years (discussed further below), great hopes have been placed on increasing international tourism arrivals as a vital source of foreign income needed to stimulate an economy devastated by the longstanding strife. Authorities hope to reach 2 million annual visitors in the near future and eventually compete with traditional tourism powerhouses like Mexico (at around 20 million arrivals/year) to become Latin America's leading travel destination (Brodzinsky, 2006).

As throughout the world, sustainability is all the rage in Colombia these days, and hence tourism development is increasingly focused on ecotourism in particular. Defined broadly as an activity that sells an encounter with an in situ natural resource, or more narrowly (in The International Ecotourism Society's (TIES) classic characterization) as "responsible tourism to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people," ecotourism has been the fastest growing segment of the global tourism industry over the past several decades (Honey, 2008: 6). As per the TIES definition,

the activity is intended to confer both ecological and social benefits, and thus is widely viewed as ideal for sustainable development, particularly in rural areas of less-developed societies that have not often seen substantial gains from conventional development mechanisms and tend to possess in relative abundance the very asset (nature areas) ecotourists seek (Fletcher, 2009). The United Nations explicitly acknowledged this association by famously declaring 2002 The International Year of Ecotourism, citing “the need for international cooperation in promoting tourism within the framework of sustainable development so as to meet the needs of present tourists and host countries and regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future” ([Http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/res/1998/eres1998-40.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ecosoc/res/1998/eres1998-40.htm); retrieved 8/12/2010). As a result, there are few countries that have not yet included ecotourism in their national development plans.

But the promise of ecotourism goes far beyond this. As Honey describes, “Around the world, ecotourism has been hailed as a panacea: a way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist, and, some claim, build world peace” (2008: 4).

At the workshop on ecotourism development in which I participated in the far northern Colombian province of La Guajira, representatives from a variety of government and non-governmental development agencies throughout the Caribbean region were all visibly eager about the prospect of harnessing ecotourism as a tool for sustainable development in their communities. A number had already banded together to create the Ecotourism Network of the Caribbean Coast, facilitated by the National Park Service. As many people enthusiastically pointed out to me, Colombia, possessing a profusion of biodiversity and

diverse topography, contains all of the natural resources that have made Costa Rica “ecotourism’s poster child” (Honey, 2008: 160). In addition, as in the latter country, all of this nature is preserved within an expansive system of protected areas boasting 58 National Parks covering roughly 10% of Colombia’s territory (SINAP, 2010). (And indeed, Costa Rican ecotourism developers, as my ongoing research in that country demonstrates, do display some concern that their market share may soon be captured by Colombia (and other less prosperous neighbors) offering better value if actions are not taken to retain it.)

Yet workshop participants were sober when confronted by recognition of the barrier likely posed to the realization of this potential by Colombia’s largely negative image in the global consciousness, discussed further below, wrought by its longstanding political strife. A recent meta-analysis of 251 case studies of ecotourism practice in diverse locations, for instance, found that success in achieving conservation outcomes is strongly correlated with political stability (Krüger, 2005). Tourism infrastructure is already in place in many locations throughout Columbia while planned in others, and administrators are poised and ready to warmly welcome visitors. All that is needed now are the tourists.

A Culture of Terror?

The impact of violence and terror on Colombia’s potential for tourism development is far from an isolated case. Phipps (2004), for instance, documents a long history of attacks on international tourists explicitly intended to increase perceptions of terror and scare off potential travelers. In large part this results from the fact that, due to its economic importance for many nations, tourism can be used as a political weapon by those wishing to harm the state by depriving it of valued revenue. In 1994, for example, 40 members of the Khmer Rouge attacked a Cambodian train, killing 11 Vietnamese passengers and taking 20 hostages, including three backpackers from wealthy western nations, who were held for

ransom. As a result of this action, Cambodian tourism dropped 50% that year (Phipps, 2004). In 1995, Kashmiri rebels demanding the release of confederates held by India captured six foreign trekkers, again all westerners. One hostage subsequently escaped, another was found beheaded, while the rest disappeared without a trace. Kashmiri tourism has been devastated ever since (Fedarko 2004). And once again in 1997, Egyptian rebels also seeking the release of imprisoned confederates attacked a popular tourist temple in Luxor, killing at least 68 visitors and local workers, in an explicit effort to deny the state valued tourism revenue (BBC, 1997). Similar instances are legion.

Yet in the case of Colombia, the threat comes less from any localized, concerted attack on the tourism industry or its international reputation than on the general aura of danger and violence that dominates international perceptions of the country as a whole. As inferred above, Colombia has long been paradigmatic of the chaos and violence that many associate with Latin America in general. The US government, for example has long issued strong warnings against travel to the country (addressed further below). In part, of course, this image is a construction propagated through frequently repeated media representations of both the country and region. Consider, for instance, depictions in the popular US films *Scarface* (Universal Pictures, 1983) and *Romancing the Stone* (20th Century Fox, 1984). In the former, the drug-running title character (Al Pacino) visits his Colombian suppliers to witness a traitorous subordinate punished for his betrayal by being hung from the skid of a hovering helicopter. In the latter, the sister of romance novelist Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) is kidnapped in Colombia in order to compel Wilder to deliver a map depicting the location of a precious gem that the sister's husband mailed to Wilder shortly before he was brutally murdered by the same criminals now holding his widow. On her journey, Wilder experiences the country as a place of nearly incessant violence, corruption, and intrigue as she is pursued by armed mercenaries who are also state police while encountering perpetual

threats spanning the entire nature-culture spectrum from hard-drinking drug runners to bloodthirsty crocodiles. This depiction is epitomized by a particular scene in which Wilder first flies into Colombia. As she traverses the airport, virtually every stereotypical image of Latin America is presented in rapid-fire succession, from colorfully-dressed indigenous people surrounded by squealing livestock to paramilitary personnel assaulting an unarmed civilian while bystanders look on indifferently.

In part, however, this association of Colombia with chaotic danger is based in a real history of deeply entrenched violence (Jimeno, 2001; Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002; OHCHR, 2005; Echavarría, 2010) that has indeed infused much of Colombian society with an air of continual threat, a sentiment well-captured, for instance, in the evocative writings of Gabriel García Márquez (e.g., 1968, 1970, 1972, 1979, 1988). This phenomenon has also been extensively analyzed by Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig, who has conducted periodic fieldwork in Colombia over the past thirty years. In a series of reports (e.g., 1984, 1987, 1989, 1992, 2003), Taussig describes the perpetual “state of emergency” in which the country seems to exist, observing in the late 1980s that

since decades Colombia has been defined as being in a state of chaos such that predictions of imminent revolution, a bloodbath, or a military dictatorship have been made on an almost daily basis. Today, in a total population of some 27 million, being the third largest in Latin America, with widespread assassinations striking, so it is said, some thirty people a day, with 500 members of the only viable opposition party, the Unión Patriótica, gunned down in the streets over the past two years, with an estimated 11,000 assassinations carried out by the more than 149 death squads recently named in the national Congress over roughly the same time period, and with over 1,000 named people disappeared (surely but a small fraction of the actual number) (1989:7)

Colombian scholar Jesefina Echavarría recalls her own upbringing in similar fashion, writing:

As far back as I can remember, there has been war in Colombia. . . While I attended high school during the decade of the 1990s, a “war on drugs and terrorism” had been declared by the state against the drug cartels. Systematic violence was exercised by state and non-state forces, paramilitary groups were created, the practice of kidnapping became a commonly used method of warfare and targeted killings of political figures were complemented by indiscriminate attacks against the population. (2010: xi)

This is not to assert that this violence has remained constant throughout Colombian history. Scholars commonly distinguish three broad periods of violence in the country: “the civil wars of the nineteenth century, ‘The Violence’ around the 1950s and the violence occurring from the last decades of the twentieth century through to the present day (Echavarría, 2010: 23; see also e.g., Ramírez, 2002). Within this last period, additionally, Echavarría identifies important differences in terms of the type of violence exercised from 1982-1993, dominated by the rise of the infamous drug cartels, from 1993-2002, emphasizing opposition between state forces and revolutionary paramilitary organizations (most centrally FARC-EP), and the contemporary situation beginning in 2002, when nascent peace talks between FARC and the government broke down and the Democratic Security Policy (discussed further below) was initiated.

Notwithstanding such significant distinctions, Taussig contends that this long history of pervasive violence has instilled within Colombian society a palpable “culture of terror” (1984), an experience of “terror as usual” (1989) produced by the condition of never knowing at what point one might contribute to the ranks of the deceased or disappeared. Others have disputed Taussig’s “culture of terror” label, however, arguing that it conveys an overly totalizing picture of the influence of violence within a society and thus denies the agency of inhabitants to resist this influence by finding spaces for the assertion of nonviolent thought and action (e.g., Margold, 1999). Regardless of the label given to it, a deep-seated fear of

systemic violence has been widely documented throughout Colombia (e.g., Jimeno, 2001). Taussig relates his own experience of the profound insecurity this sentiment provokes while waiting in his apartment for an informant who had earlier been “disappeared” by government forces and survived to go underground:

I had premonitions of how I would feel and to what desperate lengths I would go if I panicked. I didn't feel or allow myself to feel panicky at that stage. That was the most curious thing. I saw myself from afar, as it were, in another world, going crazy, not knowing what was happening, what was being plotted, what would happen next, unable to breathe. . .I turned back to the crumpled cuttings from the newspapers and the cheap Xerox copies of letters between institutions and government agencies and then, truly, waves of panic flooded over me absolutely unable to move waiting for the police to surge through the door. Any moment. Dark suits. Machine guns waving. Machismo ejaculating in the underground opera of the State. (1989:19)

Fortress Tourism

It is this persistent perception of violence, inscribed not only within Colombian consciousness but the rest of the world as well, that national tourism promoters must confront. Their physical approach to doing so in recent years has been quite striking. The conventional strategy for protected conservation area management, characterized by top-down regulation entailing strict regulation of human use and heavy-handed policing of clearly-defined boundaries, has been labeled “fortress conservation” by academic analysts (e.g., Brockington, 2002; Igoe, 2004). Similarly, we might describe the Colombian state's current approach to tourism development as “fortress tourism.” In 2003, newly elected President Alvaro Uribe initiated his so-called Democratic Security Policy (DSP) in an effort to end the perennial conflict and restore (state-dominated) order to the country (see Echavarría, 2010). Officially, this has entailed, among other measures, consolidating state control over Colombian territory, increasing the “efficiency” and “transparency” of government organs,

augmenting the military budget, and actively intervening in the illegal drug trade (Embassy of Colombia, n.d.). Part of this process has been explicitly intended to support tourism development, including the creation of a special “tourism police” unit within the Colombian National Police force. Military personnel have been deployed to patrol the nation’s highways and facilitate safe passage, such that the sight of a camouflage-clad soldier bearing an M-16 walking the shoulder of the road while a similarly-decorated tank stands idly by, while shocking to visitors unaccustomed to such sights, has become commonplace for many Colombians. In already popular tourist destinations such as Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast, police and/or military personnel are stationed on nearly every street corner day and night.

While President Uribe’s campaign has been subject to strong criticism from many quarters on a variety of grounds, including its emphasis on military force and neglect of fundamental social, political, and economic issues underlying many of Colombia’s still-pressing problems (e.g., Amnesty International, 2002; Echavarría, 2010), it does appear to have achieved substantial gains in terms of its stated goals. Within two years of DSP initiation, according to Moreno (2004), homicides had dropped 25%, kidnappings 45%, and incidences of “terrorism” 37%. By 2006 Uribe’s policy had reportedly produced a 78% decrease in kidnappings throughout the country (Brodzinsky, 2006).

The campaign also appears to have accomplished its goal of facilitating a dramatic surge in foreign visitation to Colombia. Between 2002 and 2006, foreign tourism arrivals increased 65% to 925,000 (Brodzinsky, 2006). The country’s reputation has improved to the point that Lonely Planet, the definitive travel guide for mainstream alternative travelers, ranked Colombia #9 on its list of Top 10 destinations for 2006 (Lonely Planet, 2006), and international tour operators who previously avoided the country have begun to explore its possibilities (Brodzinsky, 2006).

Despite such gains, Colombia continues to be regarded with trepidation by many potential travelers, particularly those from the US where the government continues to issue dire warnings of potential violence. On November 10, 2010, for instance, the State Department renewed its longstanding recommendation that travelers exercise extreme caution when visiting the country and banned government employees from travel overland within it, explaining:

In recent months there has been a marked increase in violent crime in Colombia. Murder rates have risen significantly in some major cities, particularly Medellin and Cali. Kidnapping remains a serious threat. American citizens have been the victim of violent crime, including kidnapping and murder. Firearms are prevalent in Colombia and altercations can often turn violent. Small towns and rural areas of Colombia can still be extremely dangerous due to the presence of narco-terrorists (US State Department, 2010).

In addition to addressing remaining physical threats to tourists' security, then, to encourage increased visitation the government must wage an ideological campaign, reckoning with persistent perceptions of Colombian violence as well. And this, of course, is precisely the intent of the ingenious new tourism slogan quoted at the outset. In what follows, I analyze how this slogan appears to simultaneously acknowledge and negate Colombia's legacy of violence in the interest of tourism development.

Risk, Safety, and Public Secrecy

A minority of tourists, of course, will visit a location precisely because of its reputation for danger and violence (Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Munt, 1994), a phenomenon that encompasses Colombia. Self-styled adventurer Robert Young Pelton, for instance, regularly publishes his guidebook to *The World's Most Dangerous Places* (e.g., 2000) and offers personal tours to some of these locations. In the past, this has included visits to meet and

converse with Colombian revolutionaries, experiences reported in the popular international press (e.g., Cahill, 2002).

Most travelers, however, are not prepared to accept such levels of risk. Even most of those in search of so-called adventure tourism, it seems, desire merely the appearance of moderate danger rather than a truly life-endangering experience of risk (Fletcher, 2010; Holyfield, 1999). As I contend elsewhere (Fletcher, 2010), then, successful delivery of adventure tourism on a standardized commercial basis appears to require the creation of a situation in which participants are able to believe that they are safe and at risk simultaneously (for discussion of how to define these slippery concepts please see the aforementioned citation), thus allowing them to experience a desired level of thrill and excitement without the existential terror that acknowledgement of true mortal danger would likely entail. Walking this razor’s edge, I suggest, requires the creation of what Taussig calls a “public secret,” something “generally known but not generally articulated” (1998a: 246), a “magnificent deceit in whose making all members of a society, so it would seem, conspire” (1992: 132), wherein all involved are implicitly aware of the contradiction between the paradoxical perceptions of safety and risk in their experience yet are able to sustain this inconsistency due to the fact that the discrepancy is seldom explicitly acknowledged. Taussig describes public secrecy as endemic to social life, observing it in phenomena as diverse as statecraft (1992), shamanism (1998a), and the defacement of monuments (1999b), while others have subsequently extended his analysis to describe an equally eclectic array of activities (e.g.,; Fletcher, 2007, 2010; Bratich, 2006, 2007; Mookherjee, 2006; Watts, 2001).

Yet the crux of Taussig’s analysis is that even when a public secret is in fact unveiled in an open forum, this may not lead to the secret’s erasure. On the contrary, he suggests, “The mystery is heightened, not dissipated, by unmasking,” for “power flows not from

masking but from an unmasking which masks more than masking does” (Taussig 1998a:222). In other words, proclaiming that one is revealing a secret reinforces the notion that there is in fact something that can alternately be concealed or revealed, when in fact, Taussig insinuates, the real “secret of the public secret is that there is none” (1999: 246). Or, as cognitive linguist George Lakoff of *Don't Think of An Elephant!* (2004) fame observes in that text, “Negating a frame evokes the frame.” Paradoxically, public disavowal of the phenomenon in question is actually enhanced by its public exposure. Hence, Taussig (1998a:242) contends that “part of secrecy is secreting” and thus that “revelation is precisely what the secret intends.” In adventure tourism, my analysis demonstrates, such exposure reinforcing concealment manifests in a variety of ways, from whitewater raft guides’ common jokes that their trip is staged like Disneyland (“The raft’s attached to a cable running down the river”) to their purposefully capsizing rafts in relatively benign rapids to augment passengers’ fear to scholarly researchers’ increasing proclamations that commercial adventure tourism cannot in fact be “true” adventure since it lacks essential elements of novelty and uncertainty (see Fletcher, 2010 for details).

Colombia’s new tourism slogan, I suggest, may function in a similar manner. On its face, the slogan appears to state quite simply that there is no longer significant risk of violence in visiting Colombia. Yet its total message is undoubtedly far more complex. As Lakoff asserts above, negating the notion of risk may paradoxically evoke this notion in readers’ minds, what Taussig (1999: 141) as well calls “presencing through negation.” For in stating that there is no risk, first, the slogan implicitly acknowledges Colombia’s dark past in which such risk was indeed publicly acknowledged as rampant, thus conjuring in readers’ minds half-conscious images of this situation known to most only through hyperbolic media images such as those earlier described.

In addition, in mentioning risk, the slogan alludes to the possibility of continuing violence in present-day Colombia, for it conveys the implicit message that the possibility of risk is sufficiently important that it must in fact be mentioned. This possibility, paradoxically, is reinforced by all of the measures described above intended to enhance visitors' (and residents') sense of safety prescribed in the DSP. The sight of armed soldiers patrolling the highways, while offering some degree of solace to anxious travelers, may simultaneously increase their discomfort by provoking them to wonder what the soldiers are patrolling for. Police checkpoints and bus searches serve a similarly ambivalent function.

And of course, as observed in the US State Department communiqué quoted above, actual violence continues to penetrate the tourism slogan's façade of tranquility at regular intervals in Colombia today. Indeed, Echavarría (2010: 3) contends that the Democratic Security Policy has paradoxically increased danger and insecurity by “legitimizing state and non-state violent actions that propel the very political violence the state promises to eliminate” (2010: 3). This violence, she asserts, is no longer localized in particular hot spots, as in the past, but now comprises “a war waged everywhere—from shopping malls to telecommunications—and everyone is suspect” (2010: x). Via the DSP, Echavarría suggests, Colombia has been transformed into something of a Foucaultian panopticon where, “In order not to be labeled ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorist-sympathiser,’ ‘we’ have to constantly monitor ‘ourselves,’ for the membership in the ‘good nation’ requires permanent vigilance and visible reconfirmation” (2010: x).

And in fact, notwithstanding the tourism slogan's insistence that significant risk is a thing of the past, visitors to Colombia are constantly reminded of the persistence of violence via warnings concerning which areas of the country to visit and which should be avoided, while simultaneously being assured that this violence is diminishing, and at any rate is contained within circumscribed locations far from one's own. At the ecotourism workshop

mentioned above, a journalist described to me, with remarkable nonchalance, his recent experience of having been taken hostage by a band of rebels and marched through the Santa Marta mountains for nearly four months. Foraging for food and sleeping on the ground, he lost more than fifty pounds in this period. “Now that,” he told me, “is real ecotourism.” Numerous participants lamented their inability to show future ecotourists these mountains’ striking beauty due to this continued rebel activity rendering such endeavors excessively dangerous.

This paradox of assurances of safety enhancing perceptions of risk is exacerbated by the reality that many of the tourists Colombian authorities hope to attract—and especially those in search of ecotourism—will be motivated precisely by anticipation of an experience of (moderate) risk. After all, this is the image of Colombia that has become ingrained in the global consciousness, and the titillation of observing (at a safe distance, of course) the reality corresponding to the image will likely be part of what many visitors will, if only half-consciously, expect. One of ecotourists’ characteristic motives, in particular, involves a quest for regions offering a relatively unexplored frontier in which opportunities for novel and unplanned experiences abound (Fletcher, 2009). Indeed, it is precisely this motivation that Colombia is hoping to tap in offering itself as an alternative to current ecotourism powerhouses such as Costa Rica which is rapidly approaching saturation.

Enhancing this paradox still further is the fact that one of the main market segments currently promoted by Proexport is precisely adventure tourism (Proexport, 2010a). Photographs and video clips on the website display gleeful tourists rock climbing, rappelling, and whitewater rafting. And of course, in media representations of Colombia such as *Romancing the Stone*, danger is strongly linked with romance and excitement, as in the course of her quest for the elusive gem Wilder finds herself engaging in what amounts to

some high-stakes adventure ecotourism, slaloming down muddy hillsides through the rainforest, plunging off cascading waterfalls, 4x4-ing through the verdant countryside, joining authentic local festivals in remote villages as the only foreign participant, even falling into a passionate love affair with a rugged expat-gone-native (Michael Douglas).

In the Tourism Authority’s new slogan, in short, far from being assured that Colombia presents no risk, tourists appear to be asked to accept that they are *both safe and at risk simultaneously*. Claiming that there is no risk in visiting Colombia paradoxically evokes the idea that there is in fact danger involved. The denial of violence conversely increases the intrigue and mystique that many tourists desire. The various dynamics described above, then, can be viewed as instances of the public exposure that Taussig considers integral to the public secret itself, helping to reinforce implicit awareness of a reality that is rarely explicitly acknowledged by tourism promoters themselves.

Instances of this paradox abound. As but one paradigmatic example, the section of Lonely Planet’s website devoted to “Introducing Colombia” proclaims: “Colombia’s back. After decades of civil conflict, Colombia is now safe to visit and travelers are discovering what they’ve been missing.” This heady endorsement, however, is immediately followed by a “Travel Alert” (a postscript which, as Taussig (1999) contends, is a particularly appropriate place for revelation of public secrecy) stating, “Travelers should exercise vigilance at all times due to the level of violent crime. Although kidnapping and homicide rates in urban areas have dropped in recent years, they remain high” (Lonely Planet, 2010).

Appropriately, Taussig claims to have formulated his public secrecy concept while doing research in 1980s Colombia, where, he writes, “there were so many situations in which people dared not state the obvious, thus outlining it, so to speak, with the spectral radiance of the unsaid” (1999:6). In Taussig’s (1999:6) analysis, in other words, the violence endemic to Colombia has long been one of public secrets sustaining the regime, “as when people

were taken off buses and searched at roadblocks set up by the police or military” and “mutilated corpses would mysteriously appear on the roads” with little public discussion of the (state) forces orchestrating these horrors. The new tourism slogan, then, appears as merely yet another public denial-cum-admission sustaining this public secret in the brave new era of “democratic security.” In a society replete with public secrets, this latest addition inserts itself seamlessly.

Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested that Colombia’s new tourism campaign, centered on the “only risk is wanting to stay” slogan, constitutes something of an ideological security campaign parallel to the government’s military security initiative, both of these intended to help reverse the country’s longstanding international reputation as an extremely dangerous place in the interest, in part, of developing a nascent tourism industry to support economic recovery in the ostensibly “post-conflict” present. This ideological campaign operates, I maintain, through construction of a “public secret” allowing visitors to feel simultaneously safe and in danger without consciously acknowledging the inconsistency between these two representations, and thus to feel a valued sense of exhilaration without debilitating fear. The campaign’s success in this regard, in conjunction with the associated military action, may be evidenced by the impressive surge in foreign visitation Colombia has experienced in recent years, along with increasing favorable coverage within the international travel press in recent years, as described above with respect to both trends. While the public secrecy dynamic appears evident within tourism promotion media, further research is needed to assess the extent to which this dynamic manifests within tourists’ perceptions of their actual experience in Colombia, as I have documented elsewhere with respect to whitewater rafting and other forms of adventure tourism (Fletcher, 2010).

This analysis, I believe, has intriguing implications for our understanding of tourism (as well as other industry) marketing in general that have yet to be explored. Indeed, Taussig (1999) suggests that public secrecy's importance as a whole has been largely overlooked to date, contending that it in fact “lies at the core of power” (1999: 6), that “without such shared secrets any and all social institutions . . . would founder” (1999: 7), and hence that in comparison with public secrecy “[w]hat we call doctrine, ideology, consciousness, beliefs, values and even discourse, pale into sociological insignificance” (1999: 3). How tourism (and other) marketers are able to harness the power of public secrecy to promote their interests in other instances, then, would constitute another valuable subject for future research.

For instance, Young Pelton, mentioned above, recently announced his new partnership with Babel Travel to offer so-called “Cultural Engagement journeys into the World’s Most Dangerous Places,” including such “inaccessible and controversial countries” as “Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, North Korea, Burma and Iran” (Pollard, 2010). Despite this explicit reference to danger in the tours’ announcement, Pelton insists that “[t]hese trips are considered ‘dangerous’ because they are designed to challenge how people view these places, not to scare them,” that there will be “no attempt to add thrills, danger or vicarious thrills to gain attention,” and that “[a]ll groups will maintain the highest level of personal and physical safety” (Pollard, 2010). The potential for public secrecy in such representations is abundant.

This analysis has particular implications for other conflict-ridden societies wishing to harness the power of tourism as a force for national development as well. The Sri Lankan governments’ recent suppression of the longstanding civil war through dispersion of the Tamil Tiger separatists has opened the door to a tourism renaissance, assisted by the country’s selection as *The New York Times*’ #1 travel destination for 2010 (New York Times, 2010). As the *Times* explains of this decision,

For a quarter century, Sri Lanka seems to have been plagued by misfortune, including a brutal civil war between the Sinhalese-dominated government and a separatist Tamil group. But the conflict finally ended last May, ushering in a more peaceful era for this teardrop-shaped island off India's coast, rich in natural beauty and cultural splendors.

The feature goes on to note briefly in passing, however, that "a few military checkpoints remain" en route to the country's gleaming beaches. The country seems ripe, therefore, for framing in terms of the same public secret analyzed herein. Whether it, and other societies facing similar circumstances, are able to capitalize on this potential, and how this compares with the Colombian case, would make an intriguing focus for future research as well.

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