AMERICAN TOURISTS IN CUBA: IMPLICATIONS OF CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Lana Wylie

Lana Wylie (PhD) is Associate Professor of Political Science at McMaster University. Her research focuses on Canadian and American foreign policy, Cuba, diplomacies of societal actors, tourism, and international relations and she is the author of Perceptions of Cuba: Canadian and American Policies in Comparative Perspective, and co-editor of Other Diplomacies, Other Ties: Cuba and Canada in the Shadow of the US (with Luis René Fernández Tabío and Cynthia Wright), among others.

Submission date: 3 July 2023; Acceptance date: 7 October 2023; Publication date: 21 May 2024

Copyright: © 2024, Lana Wylie. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

American tourism to Cuba has waxed and waned in response to changes in the political relationship. During the 1940s many Americans saw Havana as an exotic locale for their holidays. In contrast, during the Cold War, American tourism to the island was almost non-existent. Following the Cold War, some Americans returned, especially after Raul Castro and Barack Obama began to normalise relations. Although the numbers declined during the Trump presidency and the pandemic, interest in travelling to Cuba remains and a significant number of Americans continue to visit the island. Using an “other diplomacies” framework, this article discusses the impact of tourism encounters on the evolution of the US–Cuba relationship, paying attention to the degree to which encounters between American citizens and Cubans have the
potential to inform public opinion and influence the relationship between the two societies and their polities.

**Keywords:** tourism, Cuba, United States, other diplomacies, non-state actors

**Introduction**

Tourism is imbued with politics and relations of power (Srisang 1989). Yet, the fields of political science and international relations (IR) which centre these concepts have largely ignored tourism. Using an “other diplomacies” framework, this article connects seemingly disparate subjects: tourism and diplomacy. IR generally assumes tourism is unrelated to diplomacy because the interactions are only about mundane things like how to obtain extra towels for your room or where to find a good restaurant. My research contests this view by hypothesising that a significant percentage of tourists engage in interactions that have political and diplomatic significance because they mobilise or challenge understandings of national or societal identities and purposes. This article explores the other diplomatic practices that are enacted by American tourists in Cuba and by the Cubans they encounter and their effects, including how these encounters might impact the evolving political relationship between the two countries.

**Diplomacy and Other Diplomacies**

Scholarship that addresses global or international relationships traditionally focuses on state-to-state interactions. Diplomats, charged with representing official state interests abroad, are normally considered the primary vehicle through which these interactions take place (Watson 1982). Diplomats are tasked with much of the day-to-day management of the relationship between states (de Wicquefort 1997). However, they also manage relations between the peoples of the two societies through the negotiation of identities, differences, and nationalisms, and through facilitating communication between members of each society.

While certain strands within the IR literature recognise or even value the importance of non-state actors, the functions of these groups are generally viewed as operating differently from the functions of their respective governments. They are seen as having vastly different tasks and employing distinct means (Murray 2008). Furthermore, these non-state actors are not normally considered to be engaging in diplomatic practices. While some research on diplomacy has recognised that members of a state’s society can indeed engage in diplomatic activity, most of this scholarship understands these practices through a state-centric lens (Murray 2008). This view has been challenged by scholars who encourage a more flexible definition
of diplomacy. Costas Constantinou argues that the traditional conception of diplomacy is “neither exclusive nor exhaustive of the functions, actors, processes of communication, agents or objectives of diplomacy” (Constantinou 1996: xv). As such, traditional understandings of diplomacy are expanding, resulting in what Stuart Murray argues has become a “renaissance in diplomacy studies” (Murray 2008: 22). The evolution of the field has led some scholars to attempt to categorise the newer scholarship. The newer forms of research on non-state actors have been referred to as “Track Two diplomacy” or “Citizen diplomacy” (for instance, Chigas 2003; Williams, Goose, and Wareham 2008; Marshall 1949; Shemesh 2012; Bellamy and Weinberg 2008; Nye 2010; Bhandari and Belyavina 2011). Yet, there are deficiencies in these concepts for the purposes of this research project. Research about these concepts is dominated by studies of individuals or groups that act as advocates for internationally related causes like the Campaign to Ban Landmines, and knowingly engage in what could be seen as diplomatic practices. Under this category, we would find activists, academics, and others. Tourists would largely fall outside of this category. Second, much of this research is focused on the relationship between this citizen diplomacy and peace (Shemesh 2012; Kaufman and Sosnowski 2005). This focus does not consider the multiple means and outcomes of diplomacy by citizens. Understanding tourists as potential diplomatic actors thus requires novel conceptualisation.

One new approach to understanding the constitution of foreign relations, broadly understood, has been developed through the concept of other diplomacies. As a concept, other diplomacies “aims to capture analytically the everyday activities of societal non-state actors that have a diplomatic character” (Young and Henders 2012: 375). As several scholars have noted, while not new, other diplomatic practices have greatly expanded in recent years because of communication technologies, expansion of travel and global markets, transformations in territoriality, and more (Young and Henders 2012). Mary Young and Susan Henders’ award-winning and seminal article on the topic, “‘Other diplomacies and the making of Canada–Asia relations” explains,

Other diplomacies refers to a range of things that non-state actors do as they interact with each other, including across political, legal, and normative borders and differences of culture, language and other identities. As with state diplomacy, other diplomacies are centrally about negotiation and communication, which involve several practices, whether consciously or unconsciously. (Young and Henders 2012: 378)

They also relate how humans have long communicated across many types of boundaries for various purposes and that these interactions predate states and
rely on practices with a diplomatic character (Young and Henders 2012). Representative practices, as Young and Henders observe, are central to both official and other diplomacies. While conventional readings assume a prior constitution of identities in the diplomatic relationship, their approach calls attention to the assumed boundaries and borders, the “everyday discursive and material practices” that produce identity and difference in complex ways (Young and Henders 2012: 378). This concept will help to elucidate the importance of tourist encounters for the relationship between Cuban and American societies and their governments.

**Research on Tourism in IR**

While tourism research has produced a large literature (in tourism studies and human geography most notably), tourism is largely ignored in IR/political science. The IR scholarship that addresses tourism has mainly focused on a few main topics. The first is the impact of international tourism on local and national host communities; and the second is tourism as an instrument for peace. There is also a third, comparatively small foray into tourism within post-colonial IR (e.g. Vrasti 2012) and feminism (e.g. Enloe 1990) literatures.

The first focus of study is often part of the political geography (Hall and Page 2014; Squire 1994; Ryan 1991) or political economy/globalisation literature (Burns and Novelli 2007; Crouch 1999; Reid 2003; Reiser 2003; Ryan 1997; Cooper and Wahab 2005; Azarya 2010; Mosedale 2016) and although this is a rich literature it does not address the influence of tourist encounters on the relationship between the two societies. The second focus is more explicitly concerned with diplomacy. Much of it follows the assumptions articulated by Dwight D. Eisenhower that: “people in the long run are going to do more to promote peace than are governments” and refers to tourists as “peace ambassadors” (Holland 1991). According to Louis D’Amore, who spearheaded much of this research in the 1980s,

Tourism, along with its obvious international economic impact transcends governmental boundaries by bringing peoples of the world closer together through the understanding of different cultures, environments and heritage. It is potentially one of the most important vehicles for promoting understanding, trust, and goodwill among peoples of the world. (D’Amore 1988)

While this research offered important insights, this article problematises the positive relationship or market focus that was assumed by much of this literature (with the exception of scholars such as Vrasti or Enloe). Drawing on the insights
from critical geography and post-colonial IR, my research acknowledges the cultural, political, economic, and social problems associated with tourism encounters. Furthermore, this article recognises the possible negative outcomes of other diplomacies on the relations between states and societies. Just as official diplomacy may purposefully or inadvertently promote misunderstanding or hostility, tourists engaged in other diplomacies may do likewise. Young and Henders’ research reveals that other diplomacies “often helped to reproduce the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and civilisation; class; gender; and political and citizenship status” (2012). Some effects of foreign–local interactions are investigated in this article. Criss-crossed with complex relations of power, which can result in both positive effects as well as the (re)production of income inequalities and racial hierarchies, tourism is a prime site for the negotiation of other diplomacies.

**Tourism in Cuba**

Although the island had hosted foreign visitors in the previous decades, tourism as an industry in Cuba took off in the 1920s under President Gerardo Machado (Skwoit 2010: 89). At that time, Cuban tourist ads told Americans that Havana was “So near and yet so foreign” (Cuba’s Golden Age of Tourism in Travel Ads).¹ Prohibition in the US and the advent of horse racing and other gambling in Cuba sparked an increase in visitors in that period. American hoteliers opened grand hotels such as the Havana Sevilla-Biltmore. From the 1920s until the 1950s the United States was the largest source of tourists for Cuba. For example, Americans made up 85% of tourists to Cuba in 1930.² The 1940s, ushered in even more of a tourist boom. Americans saw Havana as an exotic locale for their gambling holidays (Babb 2011; Padilla and McElroy 2007). In the years leading up to World War II Cuba was the most popular tourist location in the Caribbean (Jayawardena 2003). Pre-revolutionary tourism peaked in 1957 when the country hosted 272,266 international visitors making the tourist sector the second-highest source of foreign currency in Cuba (Jayawardena 2003). At this point gambling and prostitution were among Cuba’s main draws and organised crime syndicates largely controlled Cuba’s tourist facilities. Cuba was marketed as a hedonistic holiday locale. For instance, *Time* described Havana as “one of the world’s fabled fleshpots” (CUBA: Dictator with the People 1952).

---


² The total number of tourists from all countries in 1930 was 80,000. See Feinberg and Newfarmer (2016: 5) and Figueras (2001).
Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, tourism declined both because of immediate safety concerns stemming from the fighting and potential instability, and the revolutionary government’s crackdown on illicit activity. While the new government made a concerted effort to rid the country of its image as a gambling mecca it did not actively discourage other types of tourism. In the initial revolutionary period, tourism was still seen as an important source of income. In fact, in early 1959, Fidel Castro said “We want many Americans to visit us to fill the hotels and go to Varadero and buy Cuban products. We want a prosperous tourism here” (Castro 1959). Ads for Cuban hotels and airlines attempted to reassure tourists that Havana was a safe destination. For instance, “Q” Airlines ran an ad in the *Miami Herald* in February 1959, declaring “Everything’s Fine and Fun Again in Havana” (Gustavsen 2009).

However, because many Americans had been drawn to Cuba as an illicit holiday locale, the government’s goal to close the casinos and brothels had a major impact on tourist revenue. Fidel Castro explained that previously,

There was tourism, a tourism based on gambling casinos and prostitution on many occasions. We do not want that type of tourism and we will not accept it. We will accept tourism under different bases and not on the basis of drugs, gambling and vices. (Castro 1977)

Between 1957 and 1960 tourist arrivals in Cuba were down by 68% (Jayawardena 2003). The most significant cause of the continued decline in tourism was the rising tension between the Cuban and American governments and the eventual imposition of the US embargo in 1962. Once American travel to Cuba became illegal, Cuba lost its major source of tourist revenue. Many hotels stood virtually empty, and their managers could no longer find affordable sources for necessary products like toiletries (Gustavsen 2009: 148). Tourism then gave way to other sources of foreign exchange. Sugar was a major focus for much of the following decades, followed by other natural resources such as nickel. While a few Canadians and Europeans continued to visit the island, and visitors from Eastern Europe picked up (Soviet soldiers, technicians, and others, rather than vacationers), the tourist industry was practically non-existent in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The sector saw a slight revival in the mid-1970s when the Cuban government returned its attention to tourism. For instance, in 1976 the government established the *Instituto Nacional del Turismo* (INTUR) to study and promote the sector (Espino 2000: 361). Tourist numbers subsequently began to rise and included visitors from Western countries as well as the Eastern Bloc.
The success of these efforts led to further attention to the sector throughout the 1980s, especially as it was now seen as a potential source of foreign currency that could be used to service the nation’s foreign debt. The upward trend in tourism continued during the 1980s reaching 300,000 annual visitors by 1990 (Figueras 2001).

Then with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent loss of Cuba’s main trading partners, the Cuban economy plunged into crisis in the early 1990s. The Cuban government quickly declared tourism a priority sector since it could help the country satisfy its demand for foreign currency. The government moved to open the sector to more foreign investment, establishing joint ventures with European, Mexican, and Canadian hotel and tourism companies to increase Cuba’s capacity as quickly as possible. The number of annual visitors rose to 1,774,000 by 2000 and in those early years of the twenty-first century Cuba returned to its status as one of the most popular destinations in the Caribbean, even though it was still largely excluded from the American market and thus relied on European and Canadian tourists (Figueras 2001). In 2015, Cuba ranked second in tourist arrivals in the Caribbean region (Onecaribbean 2015).  

**American Tourists in Cuba during the Castro Era**

The embargo that was imposed in 1962 effectively ended Cuba as an American getaway. The 1992 Torricelli-Graham Act (Cuban Democracy Act) and the 1996 Helms-Burton Bill further intensified the embargo but had little impact on the numbers of American tourists on the island since very few Americans had defied Washington’s dictum during the Cold War.

However, Track II of the 1992 Torricelli Law made a small inroad since it introduced the idea that cross-cultural connections could be a path towards the realisation of US goals in Cuba. It assumed that “people-to-people contact” between Americans and Cubans could spur change in Cuba. Despite this provision, many restrictions remained and although more Americans would visit Cuba in those years, they still made up a very small percentage of total travellers to the island. For instance, in 1995 only 2.8% of travellers to Cuba were American (Suddaby 1997: 125). Travelling to the island became further discouraged by the Bush administration which moved away from a people-to-people approach and increased the rhetorical animosity.

---

The Opening under Obama

The idea of people-to-people connections did not entirely disappear and was re-energised by President Obama who loosened travel restrictions in a series of policy changes over his two terms, culminating in the December 2014 announcement that the two states would begin a process of ‘normalisation.’ By making it legal for American visitors to Cuba to use their credit cards and spend money while on the island, Obama allowed Americans to consider the possibility of a Cuban vacation once again. American citizens were also permitted to bring up to $400 in goods (including $100 in cigars and rum) home with them. Other changes included raising the limit on remittances from $500 to $2,000 per quarter, allowing American telecom and related technology companies to do business in Cuba, as well as re-establishing embassies in Havana and Washington (White House 2014). As a result, the number of Americans visiting Cuba went up significantly from 63,046 in 2010 to 284,552 in 2016 and reached a high of approximately 620,000 in 2017.4

Obama’s changes reflected the idea that connections between Cuban and American citizens would encourage Cuba to change along the lines long desired in Washington, maintaining that “the best way to realize change in Cuba is to lift restrictions, allowing a flood of US citizens to travel and engage in conversations with average Cubans” (Sullivan 2015).

American Tourism to Cuba in the Trump and Biden Eras

The Trump administration significantly cooled relations with Cuba and this had a major impact on American tourist travel to the island. Trump instituted new regulations on trade and travel to Cuba in 2017, including removing the individual people-to-people category from allowable travel to Cuba. While these changes did impose new restrictions, they left a great deal of President Obama’s Cuba policy intact. However, while Trump’s actual policy changes did not ban all American travel to Cuba the misperceptions arising from Trump’s rhetoric began the subsequent decline in the number of Americans visiting Cuba. The Washington Post reported “that the new rules are so confusing that some Americans have simply opted not to travel to the island for fear of running afoul of the law” (Faiola 2018). According to the Cuban Tourism Ministry’s commercial director, Michel Bernal, figures released in the Spring of

2018 reported that “[t]he total of U.S. clients is only 56.6% of what it was in 2017 …” (Cubadebate 2018).

However, despite the confusion and the intensification of the embargo, the number of American tourists rose again in the first half of 2019, largely due to the cruise ship industry. From January to April 2019, 257,000 Americans visited Cuba which is an increase of 93% over the same months in 2018. Over half of the total arrived for a day trip, embarking from cruise ships (Cubadebate 2018). While cruise ship stopovers do bring in some tourist revenue and allow some contact between Americans and Cubans, this type of travel limits the possibility of genuine exchange between Americans and Cubans as the stopovers are relatively brief.

Although the Trump administration’s early moves on Cuba were more rhetoric than substance, as the end of Trump’s time in office approached numerous measures were enacted that had a dramatic impact on American travel to Cuba. On 5 June 2019, the administration removed the category of group people-to-people travel from its list of approved ways Americans could visit Cuba. Most significantly, this meant that Americans could no longer visit Cuba on a cruise, in a single measure effectively cutting the number of American visitors in half. Numerous other measures were enacted at the end of 2019, throughout 2020, and even into January of 2021, including limiting US airlines to a single airport in Havana, and further restricting how Americans could spend their money in Cuba, among others. In short, these measures had a major impact on American travel to the island (See Mason and Spetalnick 2020; Center for Responsible Travel n.d.; PBS 2021 for summaries of the policy changes).

Contrary to what most Cuba watchers expected and contrary to what Joe Biden had indicated on the campaign trail, President Biden did not roll back Trump’s Cuba policy when he took office. In fact, he left most of the restrictions in place throughout 2021 and early 2022, prompting the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) to refer to Biden’s Cuba policy as being stuck on “Trump’s autopilot” (Thale 2021). Some movement toward opening up came in 2022 when President Biden made some modifications to Trump’s policies; permitting more flights from the US to Cuba, reinstating the family reunification programme, removing many of the restrictions on remittances, facilitating visa

processing by reopening the office in Havana, allowing group people-to-people trips for educational purposes, and related measures (Torres and Espina 2022; “Remittance Caps and Restrictions Have Been Lifted …” 2022; Venancio 2022; White House 2022; US Department of State 2022). However, at the time of this writing Biden’s policies still leave the majority of the restrictions imposed by the Trump administration in place which severely limits American travel and tourism to the island.

**Confusion Abounds: The Legality of American Travel to Cuba**

Many Americans are interested in travelling to Cuba but are uncertain of the legality of doing so given the inconsistent and oscillating policies between and within administrations. Not only do Cuban Americans want to visit their families but Americans with no ties to the island are also interested in travelling to Cuba for leisure, cultural, and educational purposes. The fact that one of the top questions on Tripadvisor Cuba forums is “Can US citizens Travel to Cuba?” demonstrates both the interest in travel to Cuba and the confusion about the legality of doing so (Tripadvisor 2020). Forums on Tripadvisor and on other social media platforms or websites where Cuba travel is discussed also frequently contain threads that discuss not just the legality of travel to Cuba but how Americans can travel there, either legally or by circumventing the restrictions. (“How to travel to Cuba as an American” 2023; Tripadvisor n.d.a; “American worried …”; “Americans travel to Cuba” n.d.; “Can Americans travel to Cuba?” 2023).

**American Interest in Cuban Vacations**

Even before Obama officially revived the relationship, there was renewed interest in travelling to Cuba. In 2013, a Reuters headline announced, “Americans traveling to Cuba in record numbers” (Frank 2013). This headline was supported by statistics that showed that the number of Americans travelling to the Caribbean Island rose from 73,500 in 2011 to 98,000 in 2012. These numbers continued to hover in the 90,000–100,00 range until 2015 when approximately 163,000 Americans visited the island. The number of Cuban-bound Americans continued to dramatically increase over the following few years, reaching a high of 638,370 in 2018 (Statistica 2023). The numbers dropped off to just under 500,000 in 2019 due to the renewed tension between the two states and then during the COVID-19 pandemic the totals fell drastically given the worldwide halt to tourism. However, as more and more people became comfortable with travelling after the pandemic, Americans also returned to Cuba. Although the official numbers have not been released for 2022 or 2023, media reports an
increase in the number of Americans visiting Cuba. For example, according to On Cuba News, numbers of visitors continued to rebound in the early part of 2023 when Americans ranked third in the numbers of visitors after Canada and Cubans residing abroad (ONCUBA News 2023).

Over the past decade there has been an increase in American interest in travelling to Cuba. In 2014 the New York Times reported, “more than six in 10 respondents nationwide want the policy changed to enable American companies to do business in Cuba and permit Americans unfettered freedom to travel and spend money there” (Gladstone 2014). The interest in visiting Cuba was reported in polls in 2015 and 2016 (Targeted News Service 2015; Targeted News Service 2016). However, by 2017 the appeal had begun to wane, largely due to the confusion about what was allowed under US policy (Plus Company 2018). That said, interest in travelling to Cuba is still high among Americans. As one tour operator explained in 2019, “Our numbers are up so much, so it could be a lot of factors. The message is, it’s not that interest in Cuba is down – it is much more about ‘Can I go?’ and ‘How can I go?’” (Montevago 2019).

The following sections will address the diplomatic character and effects of encounters between Cubans and American visitors to the island.

Other Diplomatic Encounters

After the law preventing Cubans from entering tourist sites was repealed in March 2008, the opportunity for a greater number and more thoughtful interactions between tourists and Cubans increased. Around the same time, the government relaxed restrictions on Cubans hosting paying guests in their homes which greatly increased the number of casa particulars (rooms in private homes or whole homes) for rent.6 Since an increasing number of tourists now rent from a Cuban family the opportunity for genuine connections and communication between foreigners and Cubans has risen (Simoni 2018).

Likewise, there is a greater desire for “authentic travel” (Kolb 2017; Yeoman, Brass, and McMahon-Beattie 2007). As David Cogswell (2018) aptly explained, “Travelers were tiring of superficial tours in which they experience a destination as a series of postcard views and visits to “must-see” sights and monuments, but never feeling like they penetrated the surface, never really getting to know the people and how they live”. This trend towards having more meaningful

---

6 Note that casa particulars were first allowed in 1997 but the government had many restrictions which limited the number available for rent. See Pirone, Tommaso (2021) “Airbnb Lands in Havana: The Arrival, Adaptation, and Early Impact of a Gringo Platform in Cuba.” South Atlantic Quarterly, 120(4): 853–869.
experiences and deeper conversations with people from the host society has also led to increased opportunities for mutual learning.

There is evidence that American travellers in Cuba and their Cuban hosts are engaging in other diplomacy practices such as negotiation of difference, communication, representation, information gathering, and the management of relationships between the two societies. In doing so they each mobilise representations of national identities and purposes, sometimes countering the narratives produced by the states or interest groups within their own national contexts.

In particular, given the misinformation that is regularly promulgated by interested groups in both the United States and Cuba, the potential for American tourists to gather information about Cuba, about US policy toward Cuba, about the relationship between the US and Cuba, and related topics, and for that information to alter ideas and perceptions is significant. American tour operators point out that a visit to Cuba may be particularly illuminating for Americans. John Hernandez, an American who works for an outdoor adventure company that takes Americans to Cuba, reflected, “People (need to) go out and see for themselves and not just believe what they hear … That country is the epitome of not judging a book by its cover” (Francovich 2019).

The interactions between Cubans and Americans on the island have altered the opinions of many American visitors. For example, the widespread belief in the United States that the Cuban state impedes American travel and business is counteracted once people travel to Cuba. An American traveller reported in her blog about the myths Americans believe about Cuba, “Yes, it’s the United States, not Cuba, that has thrown up road blocks that made it difficult for Americans to go there” (Lord 2017). One American tourist explained, “I felt like I talked about the embargo quite a bit and that you know it is not Cuba, Cuba doesn’t have an embargo on themselves, Cuba doesn’t want the embargo, it’s the US that has the embargo” (Wilson and Látková 2016: 11). An American travellers, Howard L. reported, “We had a magnificent tour, 10–15 December, 2022. All that we read prior to our trip to Cuba was a lot of disinformation” (Howard 2022). Authors of a study that interviewed American travellers to Cuba, Jackson Wilson and Pavlina Látková, explained, “The participants reported that the educational aspects of the tour increased their knowledge about the situation and decreased their fear that the Cuban government did not want Americans to visit Cuba” (2016: 11).

Similarly, the idea that Cuban citizens are hostile to Americans is counteracted by American encounters with Cubans on the island. For instance, a travel blog written by a New Yorker answered a frequently asked question “Do Cubans dislike Americans?” with “If they do, they never let onto it. Most were intrigued that we were there and were very excited at the prospect of more tourism money
coming in” (Cersosimo). Wilson and Látková likewise explained, “Many members of the group reported that as the educational tour taught them more about the conflict between the US and Cuba, they became less fearful” (2016: 11).

Travel to Cuba can also dispel the idea that the Cuban state is omnipresent and controls what Cubans are permitted to discuss with tourists. One tourist reported “(The Cubans) didn’t seem like someone was behind them or listening to their conversation and monitoring their every move” (Wilson and Látková 2016: 12). Another said,

Well I thought I was going to see a lot of military folks around with their guns and stuff like that. I didn’t see one. I was like, ‘Huh?’ I didn’t see the military anywhere. I rarely even seen a police officer. (Wilson and Látková 2016: 13)

According to Mark Cersosimo, a first-time American visitor to Cuba:

If airports weren’t already nerve-wracking enough, what with the pat-downs, radiation exposure, and bomb-sniffing dogs all up in your business, imagine travelling to a country that’s been blacklisted for the better part of 55 years. As it turns out, we didn’t have anything to worry about. (2015)

Likewise, after travelling to the island, Americans report that Cuba was less dangerous than they had thought. For example, one tourist explained,

I think there is a huge negative skew from the United States about Cuba ... but I think a lot of people have a negative connotation ... I thought it was going to be a lot more dangerous than it was, and I thought it was going to be a lot poorer than it was. (Wilson and Látková 2016: 12)

This was echoed by a traveller from New York who visited Cuba in November 2022 and wrote,

The best part of the tour, was interacting with the Cuban people. Everywhere we went, the people were kind and happy to talk with us. We cannot stress enough how safe we felt at all times. We had a few evenings to go out and explore on our own, and we had no issues. (Sharona 2023)

Similarly, another tourist reported, “The experience was nothing what I expected. And I was relieved that the, the, the element of danger was not there. It was probably one of the safest places I ever visited” (Wilson and Látková 2016: 12). Another person reflected,
My mom was scared for me to go; some people were like ‘Don’t wear jewellery!’ I (was) never felt afraid at any point. I was never leery of my personal space or personal belongings going missing or anything. It was definitely more safe than people let me to believe it may be. (Wilson and Látková 2016: 12)

Similarly,

It was nice to see people at eight-o-clock at night, with little kids walking through streets (in) Havana that looked like they were falling apart. If I was in San Francisco I would feel like, ‘I am going to get mugged!’ Havana, it was one of the safest places I have visited. It’s just the buildings look horrible to the visitor’s eye. But it’s only because they do not have the resources to fix it. It doesn’t mean that there are bad people or criminals living in these buildings. (Wilson and Látková 2016: 12)

Similar responses are reported on websites like Tripadvisor or in travel blogs. For example, a woman from Minneapolis explained, “it is very safe, there are a lot of solo female travellers in Havana. just use the same precautions you would anywhere you travel …” (Tripadvisor n.d.b: Joann P). An American blogger reflected, “I felt totally at ease walking around at night. I have been haggled with more in Manhattan than in Havana” (Scott n.d.). According to Wilson and Látková:

The participants’ perceived safety of Cuba as a travel destination improved after their trip. They attributed this perception to empowered communities, a lack of an intimidating government presence, a positive orientation to them as American tourists, and lower levels of economic disparity and desperation than they expected. (2016: 13–14)

The authors explain,

Many factors tainted the image of Cuba at one point or another. The antagonistic historical relations between the countries negatively impacted tourists’ perception of Cuba as a travel destination. Some among the current group of American tourists shared that they and/or their friends and family held the perception that Cuba was a dangerous destination. In contrast, the experience of travelling in Cuba improved the tourists’ perception that Cuba was a safe and welcoming destination for American travellers. (2016: 14)
They conclude,

This suggests that the perception of danger associated with Cuba as a destination may be dispelled after a critical mass of organic word-of-mouth reports from American tourists grows louder than autonomous negative news and official US government messages directly conveyed or indirectly communicated through the presence of the embargo. (2016: 14)

Polls show that American opinion of Cuba has improved since 1996, when 80% of Americans held an unfavourable opinion of Cuba. By 2009 this had fallen to 60%. However, after President Obama loosened restrictions allowing tourism to dramatically increase, for the first time, the number of Americans holding a negative opinion of Cuba fell below 50%, reaching a low of 40% in 2016 (Gallup, n.d.). While it is difficult to disentangle the relationship between tourism and the favourable opinion of Cuba from the numerous other factors that likely came into play at that time (including everything from changes within Cuba to Obama’s speeches) the anecdotal research thus conducted does indicate some correlation between increased tourism and an increase in positive opinions of Cuba. Tom Hayden in *Listen Yankee* argues that the “hundreds of thousands of Americans [that] have visited Cuba, legally and illegally, as tourists … [bring] back deep sympathy for the island” (2015: 8). Furthermore, this association between visiting a country and increased awareness of and sympathy for the people and society of the host nation has been shown in the literature (D’Amore 1988) and supported in the case of Canadian tourism to Cuba (Wylie, forthcoming).

The potential for tourist encounters to contribute to a more positive relationship between Cuban and American societies is noted in the literature. Tourist encounters have been shown to increase trust between societies and based on their interviews with Cuban hospitality managers, Sergei Krushchev, Tony L. Henthorne and Michael S. Latour assert that “a strong infusion of US tourists to Cuba, coupled with Cuban–US joint hospitality business ventures, would be key antecedents to trust building” (2007: 48). The importance of trust in any improvement in the US–Cuba relationship has been documented by Calum McNeil. He argues that the “lack of quality information in sufficient quantity” is a major factor impeding trust in the US–Cuban relationship (McNeil 2018: 169). He maintains that “[t]his can be understood as a function of the embargo, which is not simply economic but about restricting the movement of people” (2018: 169). Thus “[l]imiting social interaction limits the possibility of learning and transcending enmity” (2018: 169).
Other diplomatic encounters with Americans may also influence Cuban views. Initial research indicates that prior to 2014, many Cubans felt that they understood American popular culture but had not had the opportunity to meet Americans in person. Interviewed a few months after the normalisation was announced in 2014, a 20-year-old professional dancer from Santa Clara, reflected, “Everything can change from tourists coming to Cuba. We’re going to have more direct communication with them” (Mannon 2015). A math student from the University of Havana said, “I don’t dislike Americans. I cannot tell you much more because I haven’t had any contact with them … Cultures will mix. It’s always good to meet new people …” (Mannon 2015). An accountant from Havana commented, “Whether or not they are good or bad, I cannot tell you, because I don’t know many Americans” (Mannon 2015). Thus, the potential for positive cross-cultural encounters and enhanced understanding between the two societies may increase alongside tourism.

However, as previous research on other diplomacies points out, other diplomacies can have negative outcomes. In particular, other diplomacies, like state-based diplomacy, can reproduce the hierarchies of culture, race, class, ethnicity, and gender; among other potential categories of exclusion (Young and Henders 2012). There is considerable literature on the negative impacts of tourism on the host community (Wilkinson 2008) and some of these effects, including those that arise from other diplomatic encounters, have the potential to be even more harmful in the context of the history of US–Cuban relations. The idea that greater interaction with American tourists may have a negative influence on Cuban culture is a concern on the island. While Cubans are generally positive about the economic benefits that may flow from American tourism, it is not surprising given their history, that they remain protective of their social values and culture (“National Poll” 2015). A professional dancer from Santa Clara reflected on the idea that Americans might change the Cuban culture. He explained, “But to change our culture? We are an intelligent people, so I don’t think we should change our culture. Our culture is beautiful. I don’t think that we have to change that” (Mannon 2015). A study of Cuban tourism managers found that

the participants feared US-led ‘contamination’ of their society with the return of gaming establishments and a repeat of what is perceived as ‘imperialist or capitalist’ enslavement of the Cuban worker, with the bulk of the profits going back to the United States. (Krushchev, Henthorne, and Latour 2007)

Future fieldwork in Cuba will be particularly helpful in revealing the potential negative influences of American tourist encounters.
Conclusions

This exploration of the other diplomatic practices that are enacted in encounters between American tourists and the Cubans they engage with while on vacation demonstrates the interplay between tourism and relationships between societies that can have effects that extend well beyond the beach. Despite the restrictions on travel to Cuba that were reimposed by the Trump administration many Americans remain interested in Cuba and would like to travel there. These connections have the potential to have a major influence on the future of relations between the US and Cuba. Understanding the ways in which tourists engage in diplomacy and exploring the types of connections that are fostered between tourists and Cubans will be a crucial step in the exploration of the impact that greater travel will have on the US–Cuban relationship.

References

“Americans travel to Cuba community” (n.d.) TripAdvisor forum.


“CUBA: Dictator with the people.” Time, 21 April 1952, 38.


de Wicquefort, Abraham (1997) The Ambassador and His Functions (translated by J. Digby in 1716 and reproduced by the Centre for the Study of Diplomacy, University of Leicester, 1997).


Wylie, Lana (forthcoming) “Other diplomatic encounters: Canadian tourists in Cuba.” In Lana Wylie, Mary Young, and Susan Henders, eds. Other Diplomacies and Canada: Representations and Connections Beyond the State. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
