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Visite Uruguay: Del Balneario al País Turístico. 1930-1955

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Historians of tourism have been very active in the River Plate region during recent years, especially the teams based at Mar del Plata in Argentina and Montevideo in Uruguay. Some of the most interesting historical work on destination resorts has come from this region of the globe. The book under review is a welcome addition to the output of the latter group, and continues their extension of the coverage of tourism history in Uruguay further into the twentieth century, and outwards from the national capital into the provinces. The focus is on the presentation of developments in tourism through advertising and promotional material produced by national and regional entities, supplemented by histories of particular destina-

tions and by a selective use of the press. Some valuable publicity films have been located, and their representations added into the mix. This enables the authors to present a panorama of tourist activity across the country as a whole, moving beyond the coastline to follow the course of the Uruguay River and penetrate the hills and forests of the interior. Their coverage ranges from the capital itself, and its string or chain of adjacent sea-bathing resorts, to the smallest emergent green shoots of tourism activities in and around the hotels of provincial capitals in locations barely registered on the national tourism map even in the 1950s. The book's title communicates its central theme: the transition of the dominant projected tourist image of Uruguay during the middle decades of the twentieth century, from an original emphasis on the hotels, boulevards and beaches of the national capital, to the idea of a welcoming, hospitable 'tourist nation' offering a rich diversity of experiences and opportunities across a variety of landscapes and regional cultures.

This is very much a 'national' history, although it incorporates external theoretical perspectives, from Urry and Bourdieu to Hiernaux and MacCannell. As such it will be valuable as a case-study for international overviews and comparative projects, and it will benefit especially from being set alongside Elisa Pastoriza's *La Conquista de las Vacaciones*, which provides a similarly wide-ranging overview of tourism development in Argentina. It also pays necessary attention to the international dimensions of tourism in Uruguay, which was seen as a 'fuente de riqueza' or source of wealth for the national balance of payments from an early stage, and especially to the enormous Argentinian market across the River Plate (and indeed the

River Uruguay, although the demand generated from Buenos Aires was the great prize). Brazil was much less important, although there is some discussion of shopping and casino gambling developments on the land frontier between the two nations. It would be interesting to learn more about what might be labelled the 'cold war' between Uruguay and Argentina in the early 1950s, with its serious short-term consequences for the Uruguayan tourism industries. As Nelly Da Cunha discussed in an earlier work, fluctuations in diplomatic relationships and rates of currency exchange between the River Plate neighbours affected Uruguayan tourism much more deeply and directly than distant 'world wars', in which the nations of the Southern Cone remained neutral. Apart from disrupting trading patterns, the Second World War did come close to home through the blockade and scuttling of the German cruiser Graf Spee in the River Plate estuary in December 1939, which provided unscheduled additional entertainment for holidaymakers in Montevideo.

The book's main focus is on the changing ways in which Uruguay's tourist attractions were represented, over a pivotal half-century, through contemporary media and publicity systems. The dominant theme emerges as the enjoyment of water, through beaches, aquatic sports, and scenic tourism associated with waterfalls and coastal or riverside vegetation and wildlife. There were local peculiarities, such as Salto's association with oranges and early attempts to promote industrial archaeology around Fray Bentos and Colonia (where a former bull ring played its part), but water predominated, together with scenery (including ranges of hills and attractive geological features). A casual reader

might assume from this material that Uruguay was a mountainous country, and it comes as a surprise to find that the country's highest point is only 514 metres or 1686 feet above sea level. Beyond the country's physical attributes, a theme which extended to appreciative descriptions of the contours of its bathing beauties, assiduous efforts were made to identify Uruguay with hospitality and friendliness towards the country's guests. [221]

Not that domestic tourism was neglected. In this respect, the role of the state in encouraging healthy leisure, outdoor pursuits and the enjoyment of Uruguay's natural attractions, which had contemporary parallels in any other countries, took unusual and interesting forms. The conversion of Holy Week into a secular Tourism Week was particularly striking, alongside the co-option of Carnival as a tourism focus, as was the active role of state intervention in the democratic, positive promotion of holidaymaking, which at times shaded over into full-blown 'social tourism'. Alongside all this, however, was a sustained effort to attract foreign currency through elite big spenders. Government endorsement and promotion of Punta del Este, with its country club and film festival, was indicative here, following on from national and municipal investment in up-market hotels in Montevideo. But the role of government went much further, in provision as well as publicity. Casino gambling was a powerful weapon in its armoury, not least to kick-start tourism in new areas, with 40 per cent of the profits going to local government and health services. Sport could largely be left to private enterprise or voluntary associations, although the varieties promoted by the state publicity machine were those associated with the wealthy and privile-

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ged: polo, yachting, rowing. The absence of football from this panorama is interesting, not least because the first World Cup was held in the new Centenary Stadium at the beginning of the period under review. Road-building was also an important aspect of opening out the country to tourism initiatives through the extension of motor tourism and bus services, and it is interesting to see how invisible the railways are in this account, despite their own modernising efforts during this difficult period. Anyone with a comparative interest in the historic role of government in tourism promotion would find an excellent extreme example in Uruguay during this period.

This useful book is clearly presented and opens out a valuable seam of source-based argument. If at times it is a little repetitive and descriptive, even formulaic, this has to do with the nature of the exercise and the problems of controlling large research projects with multiple researchers and authors. Although the argument of the book is firmly rooted in the experience of one small country, it has the capacity to contribute to much wider debates, both within and beyond Latin America.

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