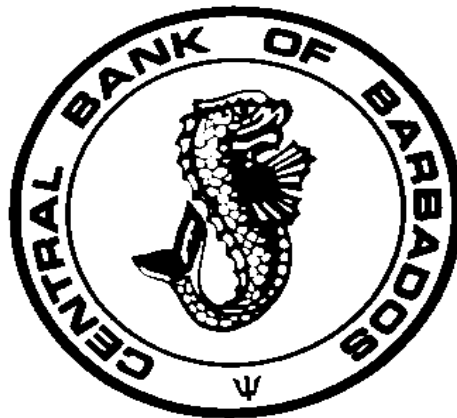


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**BOOK REVIEW: OVERBOOKED: THE EXPLODING BUSINESS
OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM, BY ELIZABETH BECKER,
SIMON AND SCHUSTER, 2013**

BY

DELISLE WORRELL



CENTRAL BANK OF BARBADOS

BOOK REVIEW

OVERBOOKED: THE EXPLODING BUSINESS OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM, BY ELIZABETH BECKER, SIMON AND SCHUSTER, 2013

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DELISLE WORRELL¹

This is an important book for all Barbadians. Tourism is this country's business, and this book takes a critical, informed and sympathetic view of the growth, potential and dangers which have emerged as tourism has evolved, since the early 1950s, to become an economic sector of major importance in a surprising variety of countries. Elizabeth Becker has researched the tourist industry right across the globe, and presents a warts-and-all picture that captures tourist activity, both from the ground up as well as from the broader view of the policy maker. Along the way she treats us to a rich menu of little known facts, and shows us an industry with the potential to transform lives and economies, but not always for the better.

The story of modern tourism, based on affordable holidays by middle-class people, begins in France after the Second World War. Prior to that, travel was an exclusive preserve of the rich, who could afford to devote months to a grand tour. An American who became familiar with European culture during the war is credited with being a vital catalyst in the emergence of American travel to Europe in the post-War period. Arthur Frommer's *Five Dollars a Day* guides made Americans aware they could enjoy the storied cultures of Paris, London, Rome and more, at prices they could afford. Recognising this important source of foreign exchange, the French channelled Marshal Plan funding to finance the construction of hotels and tourist facilities. France established the world's first Ministry of Culture in 1959, took measures to preserve small farms and aspects of the French way of life, and were able to protect their coasts from the extensive high-rise hotel development that characterises Spanish tourism, for example. As a result of maintaining the special appeal of the French experience, France remained the largest global tourist destination up to the time Becker wrote, with 78 million tourists and over US\$48 billion of expenditure.

Next Becker turns her attention to tourism gone wrong. Venice is being destroyed by tourism, and UNESCO, which has long featured Venice in its World Heritage list, has advocated remedial measures, if the city is to retain its authenticity. In one telling personal experience which proves her point, Becker tells of her effort to uncover the last remaining outlet for authentic Murano glass in all of Venice. Cambodia is an even more depressing example of tourist development that has brought no benefit to the local population, where tourism has been characterised by land grabs, corruption, sex tourism and scams, such as phony orphanages offering infants for adoption.

Becker also uncovers the economics of the cruise tourism industry. Waiters and service staff depend entirely on tips; a waiter's monthly salary is US\$50 per month, plus board, and they have to buy their own air tickets from their home countries. Cruise liners are mostly registered in

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countries such as Liberia and Panama, where they escape laws regulating minimum pay, environmental requirements, etc. Modern cruise liners feature on-board shopping malls, and retail sales are a major source of profit for cruise companies. Local retailers in ports of call get little custom, as Becker found when she sought out a local jewelry shop in Belize. Other profit centres for cruise companies are on-board casinos and art auctions. In the end, Becker says of her cruise: "It was fun, but was this foreign travel?" (Page 130).

Dubai's tourism is based on shopping and a "united nations of prostitutes" (Page 92). Its economic success is founded on the co-option of citizens without votes and immigrants who have no rights. Unskilled immigrant labour is cheap, and oil money finances tourism development of a high standard. Professional expertise is contracted in by offering competitive tax-free salaries.

In contrast, Becker recounts an ecotourism cruise to Costa Rica, which has pursued a deliberate policy of promoting sustainable tourism, with the active support of Non-Governmental Organisations in the US, and local universities. Her cruise "took us on a voyage to foreign countries with the greatest luxuries in the 21st century - actual experiences in the disappearing wilderness" (Page 257). Becker's ecotourism experiences in Sri Lanka were similarly rewarding.

China is the emerging giant of global tourism, with more Chinese travelling abroad than any other single country. China has been actively promoting inward tourism, but pollution in major cities sours the experience for many, and the systems under which some tour guides and others in the industry work often do not predispose them to offer high quality service.

US tourism has stagnated since 2000, largely because the Fortress America policies adopted after 9/11 made the US seem unwelcoming to many. The early dismissal of Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Olympics, at a meeting in 2007, served as a wakeup call, and the Obama administration has since taken active measures to revive official support for tourism.

This wide ranging user's eye view of tourism, of which my review offers only a flavouring of its richness, offers many insights that we may use to inform the best way forward for Barbados' tourism. Becker is typical of the discriminating tourist that Barbados aims to attract, and it is reassuring that her most satisfying experiences are those which offer the opportunity for travel that is truly foreign, that brings exposure to new cultures and knowledge and experience that is genuinely novel. That is the direction in which Barbados' tourism is going, by and large. There are also cautions about cruise tourism, and the limited net benefit it provides. As for long-stay, sustainability lies in the more discriminating types of cruise, which enriches the experience of the tourist, and preserves the uniqueness of each destination.