

## **Performing Diversity: Boundaries of the past as Tourism Attraction for today**

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The connections between international boundaries and tourism are multifaceted (Timothy 2001). Indeed, boundaries may have a deep impact on tourism fluxes and exchanges, on the basis of their permeability (that is, consenting exchanges of people and goods) or how impermeable they are (closed). A good example is represented by the renovated success of Marbella as a tourist destination in the nineties, after the opening of the so-called "Iron Curtain" and the appearance of visitors coming from the former USSR and from other ex-Socialist countries.

Boundaries do not just limit fluxes between contiguous political entities; they are powerful dividers of sovereignty. They can, therefore, demarcate regions with different administrations, different laws and different tax systems. In this case, boundaries play a political role as markers of difference, and borderlands are turned into tourist regions simply because they are situated in the immediate vicinity of the boundary itself. Cross-border shopping is probably the most ubiquitous form of borderland tourism: goods can be cheaper on the other side or simply available on one side, while forbidden on the other (Minghi 1994; Timothy 1999). Of course, cross-border tourism is the flipside of smuggling: it just depends on the permeability of the border. In general, it has been observed that "the further people live from the frontier the less frequently they will cross, but the value of goods purchased on each trip will likely be higher", (Timothy 2001, p. 60). Other forms of cross-border tourism may be connected to specific activities, such as hunting, fishing, gambling, or even medical needs, which are cheaper/more expensive, or legal/illegal on the other side of the border. As far the cost of activities is concerned, one of the most recent developments of cross border tourism is "medical tourism", the practice of crossing borders in order to get a cheaper medical procedure. For instance, in the borderlands between Italy, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia (Albrecht, Pribakovi Brinovec and Stalc, 2006), "dental tourism" is practised, because in Slovenia and Croatia dentists are cheaper. Outside Europe, "dental tourism" is quite common also, from the United States to Mexico.

Some specific forms of medical tourism, such as fertility tourism (the prac-

tice of traveling to another country for fertility treatments, which are not allowed at home), could be understood also from a legality/illegality standpoint. However, the most classic form of cross-border legality tourism is represented by border localities attracting visitors from the other side with casinos. Again, Slovenia is a good example, since before the dissolution of former Yugoslavia it used to be famous for its hunting grounds among Italians, and now, it attracts them because of gambling (Dwyer et al, 2012). Other forms of “vice tourism” can be practiced in borderland regions, if alcohol, sex, or drugs are easier to get than on the other side of the border. Indeed, “Welcome to Tijuana, tequila, sex and marijuana”, the song’s refrain by the pop singer Manu Chao, offers a perfect synthesis of the tourist illustration of the U.S.-Mexico borderland, since in the popular imagination, the Mexican borderland is notorious for its liberal laws concerning prostitution and narcotics. All the same, it should be added that this kind of cross-border tourism does not need an international boundary to develop: the tourist resort of Stateline has mushroomed along the California-Nevada border because of the renowned softness of Nevada’s marriage, divorce, and gambling laws.

Apart from cross-border fluxes, other issues concerning borders and tourism pertain to the transnational management of tourist destinations, such as the Tatra Mountains between Poland and Slovakia (Taczanowska 2004), or protected areas, such as the international parks along the US-Canada border (Timothy 1999).

Eventually, borders can represent a tourist attraction in themselves, both because they are barriers of the present, featuring the signs of a conflictual landscape, or are other symbolic landscapes. This is the case of “frontiers” and boundaries of the past, marked by the remnants of concrete structures, such as the Great Wall of China or Hadrian’s Wall in Great Britain, or simply perceived as the relict borderscapes of the region.

#### *Borders as tourism attractions*

Borders can play the role of a tourist attraction in two different ways; first, as material objects, as signs of conflicted present or of a conflicted past. Secondly, in a more nuanced manner, as abstract lines, or better as symbolic landscapes, supposedly denoting a cultural diversity. In the first sense, the most well known example is Wagah, the only road border crossing between India and Pakistan,

where everyday a spectacular border ceremony of closure is performed. Quite famous, in this perspective, is also the border separating the two Koreas, even if, in this case, the most relevant attraction is the network of underground tunnels built up by the northern neighbor. They were probably built for espionage and military purposes, and turned into a tourist spot by the South Koreans, for tourists visiting the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the 38th parallel. In both cases, the border denotes a landscape of power, marked by national symbols openly referring to the conflictual situation between the two sides.

In a similar way, relic political frontiers, or areas formerly separating different political entities and still visible in the landscape, are usually fused into the national heritage of the country that they were built to protect. Later, they become tourist attractions in this perspective. In this regard, they can be considered historical monuments and turned into cultural vestiges to be preserved and valued (such as the Great Wall in China, Hadrian's Wall, and Offa's Dike, perhaps the most treasured symbol of Welsh nationalism). The Berlin Wall is another relic frontier that is a widely popular European tourist attraction – even if, to the great dismay of many of its visitors, it has now been almost totally destroyed and replaced by a simple line drawn on a pathway as testimony to the old political division.

Political tourism is not only associated with wars, conflicts and cultural tensions. On the contrary, territorial features of the political present, such as border areas, can sometimes be turned into objects for foreign visitors' curiosity. In tourism terms, the boundary may be interpreted as a severance between something desirable and something that is (or must be) ignored because of its unattractive image. This is, for instance, the reasoning behind the depiction of the Island of Hispaniola on maps as "half an island" so as to avoid the negative reputation of its less fortunate side, Haiti, while promoting its attractive side, the Dominican Republic. In order to stress even further a separation from its other half, the island is very frequently referred to with the touristic name of Santo Domingo.

Most frequently, the boundary symbolizes the limit between something known and something different. Indeed, boundaries have a symbolic meaning, since they denote a supposed difference in cultural terms (Newman and Paasi, 1998). In this perspective, sometimes simply crossing a boundary – with the differences in language and culture it suggests – can be a touristic experience, and the icons of this demarcation turned into attractive objects (Thimoty, 2001). In

such cases, boundaries can function as tourism attractions *per se*.

Occasionally the basic idea of difference can be commoditized as an attraction. For example, San Diego takes advantage of its proximity to the Mexican border to market itself as a quasi-exotic destination, while, in the US, the national fast-food chain “On the Border” takes advantage of the same exotic effect of the border to advertise its Tex-Mex restaurants all over the country.

In some circumstances, the boundary itself – notwithstanding its immaterial nature – is touted as a symbolic marker of diversity and made into a local tourism attraction, even if it cannot be even seen or recognized in the landscapes. This last, peculiar situation will be the focus of the case study analyzed in the present chapter.

*St. Maarten/St. Martin: “Get the experience of visiting two island colonies in the same 37 square miles”*

St. Martin/St. Maarten is a small island in the Caribbean, which is politically divided between France and the Netherlands. The division is a consequence of the colonial era, when the Dutch settled at Little Bay and the French in the Orleans area. A partition treaty between the two colonizer countries was signed in 1648, though later on the Dutch and the French continued battling, each having complete control of the island for years at a time. Only in 1817 was the conflict peacefully resolved and the current boundary established. But the French and Dutch were not the only people to influence the emerging culture of the island. In 1648, as plantations sprang up across St. Martin/St. Maarten, the island began to import slaves from Africa, so Africans also contributed much to the island’s heritage.

Today, the southern part of the island, the Dutch side, has the status of a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, its official languages are Dutch and English, and the currency is the Netherlands Antilles guilder (to be substituted by the Caribbean guilder in 2013). While the Northern part of the island constitutes the French overseas collectivity of Saint-Martin, the official language is French and the currency is the Euro. However, since France and the Netherlands are both members of the EU, and signers of the Schengen Treaty, the division between the two parts of the island, which was once the source of many battles, should be considered totally irrelevant. The island should represent a perfect example of a bi-national, but “borderless”, land. Indeed, both

countries are in the Euro area. And the whole island, as with many others in the Caribbean region, is strongly permeated by an American influence, and a large majority of the population is of Afro-American origins. English is also widely spoken, and is in fact the most diffused language on the island.

Notwithstanding this general ethnic, linguistic and cultural homogeneity, St. Maarten/St. Martin's tourism branding is focused on its cultural diversity, both with texts and images or maps. The importance of the political division is highlighted because of its capacity to distinguish the island from the others in the region (St. Martin/St. Maarten is in fact the smallest divided island in the world). Discourse analysis of Anglophone tourism literature, for instance, points to two major strategies: indeed, in websites and other written touristic materials, the first thing stressed about the place – after its geographical location in the Caribbean – is usually its geopolitical division. This division is constantly referred to, especially through the regular use of the double place name (St. Martin/Sint Maarten). The “uniqueness” of the island is also emphasized by the second strategy. In this case, the cultural differences of the two sides of the island are played up through references to the cultural landscape, the cuisine, the language, and so on. It is also generally mentioned that two different currencies are in use on the island: the Euro on the French side and the Netherlands Antilles florin (guilder) on the Dutch side (even if, as previously remarked, the only commonly accepted currency, all over the island, is the dollar)

Visual analysis of cartographic representations of the island offers similar results. In postcards and tourist maps, the most eye-catching feature of the island – along with the usual icons of tourism, such as bathing beauties and sailing boats – is the international boundary bisecting the land (Rose, 2001). Place names are often recorded in their double version (even if sometimes the English version is added), and textual signs and visual symbols, such as the two flags, recall the Frenchness/Dutchness of the two sides. Likewise, the two flags – whose patterns and colors are similar, but inverted – make a pleasant image that frequently appears on all kinds of objects. Other souvenirs present the map of the island bisected by a big borderline. As stressed by Timothy (2001), guide and travel books make their contribution as well, tending to “promise an international experience that is ‘delightfully Dutch’ and ‘fantastically French’.”

Indeed, the theme of political division is probably the primary selling point of the island; the border is its most outstanding feature. Nevertheless, when you actually get to visit the place, you cannot see any boundary – prominent on the

maps, it is totally invisible in the landscape, where the only physical markers of its presence are a monument and some road signs. Even Euros are not so welcome. Certainly, some distinctions are preserved, even forcibly imposed. On the French side, many restaurant names recall the French connection; on the Dutch side, Delphi ceramics are sold, together with small windmills, as souvenirs. There are even a couple of Indonesian restaurants, keeping alive the old network of the Dutch Indies – although the most popular dish on both sides of the island is American-style spare ribs. Casinos are only located on the Dutch side but are mostly owned by Italians and visited by everyone.

So, St. Martin/St. Maarten's diversity is apparently much more fabricated than real, a feature promoted merely to give a special flavour to the island and make it look different from the many other "exotic paradises" in the Caribbean Sea. Its border is the remnant of a colonial, and divided, Europe that no longer exists, a Disney-fied attraction to be played up to the mainly American tourists as a condensed stereotype of the far away region's cultural richness.

### *Conclusion*

From a St.Martin-Sint Marteen standpoint, tourism could be described as a monster, capable not only of turning anything into a commodity (including historical events and geopolitical features), but also of manipulating history and geopolitics for its own ends and resurrecting boundaries, as commoditized attractions, even in those corners of the world that for practical purposes could be totally borderless. However, it is possible to take also the opposite view: tourism is not an ogre, but a very useful tool that can help us to understand the transient meaning of everything, geopolitical issues included. From this perspective, it is possible to appreciate that cultural diversity does not have a geopolitical meaning *per se*: it can be either a tourist attraction or a reason of conflict and war. In the same way, it becomes possible to understand that even conflict and war, hatreds and passions, can be overcome in time by curiosity and nostalgia. Further, one can understand that even political boundaries created hundreds of years ago to separate the realms of influence of the most powerful colonial nations of the time can now be converted into meaningless souvenirs for borderless tourists.

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