THE PARADOXES OF A TOURISM CRISIS: 
THE EXAMPLE OF THE ISLAND OF MARTINIQUE 
(FRENCH WEST INDIES)

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Abstract 

Even though the Caribbean region has experienced a sustained growth in tourism, Martinique's position, like that of the French West Indies, is rather paradoxical. Indeed, those French islands (Guadeloupe, Martinique) that could have made a claim to being amongst the leaders at the end of the 1980s, are now facing a crisis. Martinique attracts fewer and fewer French visitors and the number of North American visitors remains on the margin. The tourism potentiality is exciting, but the resources have not been enhanced, and tourist facilities are insufficient and mainly aging. The destination is suffering from a lack of image; its commercial positioning is unclear – somewhere between an all-inclusive resort tourism hit by strong regional competition and newer hesitant approaches such as ecotourism.

Through this paradox of a tourism crisis happening under the Lesser Antilles sun, Martinique’s example allows us to illustrate the complexity of the issues around tourism development by highlighting the significance of the relationships between tourism and the host society.

Introduction

The island of Martinique, or Madinina (the ‘island of flowers’), is a classic coastal resort destination offering all the necessary ingredients for a tropical break: long beaches with coral reefs, exotic landscapes with banana and sugar cane plantations, and of course, dense sempervirent forests that cover the flanks of a volcano. To this we can add the multicultural people, parties, friendliness and rum to create the exotic nature of the region. Notwithstanding,
all these current popular resources are available throughout the Antilles (Wilkinson, 1989, 1997). The Caribbean has experienced a sustained growth, benefiting notably from its very favourable circumstances (it is not within reach of known health risk areas, it has been spared from the latest natural disasters and it has not yet suffered from a major terrorist incident). It has been estimated that there are around 45 million international tourists who come to the Caribbean shores (Duval, 2004; Dehoorne, 2007; CTO, 2012), but the spread of the flows is unequal and regional competition is fierce, especially between the islands of the Greater Antilles (Mc Elroy and De Albuquerque, 1998).

The recent history of tourism on Martinique is complex. After a period of constant growth until the end of the 1990s, the sector has since undergone a persistent deterioration in tourism flows. The risk of crisis is very real, but it remains a highly sensitive issue on the island. It is important to remember that in November 2002 there was a general outcry at statements made by the Accord group on their reasons for leaving Martinique, “an appalling social climate” (Antilla, no. 1014, 2002: 19). The advanced state of decay of the abandoned hotel complexes was in situ evidence of a long term strategy by a transnational group who had other more lucrative interests in the Greater Antilles (Pattullo, 1996). The situation is even more fragile since the strikes of February 2009 which have paralyzed the economy of the French West Indies for more than 30 days! But recent events have only accelerated the decline of a tourist industry already in crisis.

Behind the legitimate hopes that tourism offers and the reality of its everyday ‘unpleasant aftertastes’, there are major contradictions and underlying tensions existing in Martinique society (Soubeyran, 1991). In 1968 G. Cazes had already referred to the “Martiniquean tourism paradox” and questioned the “slow and difficult progress in its development”.

The information collected in this study are based largely on surveys carried out ten years among tourists, host communities, tourism professionals. These surveys have been conducted especially in applied research as part of the tourism master education and regional planning from the University of the West Indies and Guyana.

In order to pursue this reflection, the paper begins by taking stock of the number of visits and examining the distribution of tourism activities in the available space; then it emphasises the economic issues and it concludes with some views on the current limitations to tourism development on Martinique.

Tourism in Martinique across the flows

Firstly it is necessary to point out certain limitations to the statistics. Even though it is easier to count the incoming and outgoing numbers for an insular territory, the main difficulty relates to the nature of the flows. The Martiniquean population is much more mobile – the young people from the Antilles usually go to French mainland universities and those who have emigrated return home as often as possible for the summer holidays. We should not forget the many return journeys made by French civil servants working on the island. Consequently there are population categories who, to a certain extent, are causing the over estimation of the official tourism flows. Can a student who returns to his or her island of birth for the two month summer break be classed as a tourist? This phenomenon is noticeable at the Aimé Césaire airport on Martinique during July and August when the intense

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1 “The study of tourism in the French West Indies immediately comes up against an astonishing ambiguity; the neighbouring islands, so similar in nature, drink incessantly from this source of wealth and yet the current seems to deliberately avoid Martinique and Guadeloupe despite their best efforts to redirect it their way” (Cazes, 1968).
activity is largely because of the resident population or that originating from the island. Conversely, the statistics from maritime flows (cruise and pleasure boat) are more accurate. For the purposes of this paper, all data has come from the CMT (Martinique Tourism Authority) and from the ex ARDTM (Agency for the Regional Development of Tourism on Martinique which joined with the departmental tourism office to become the CMT in 2003); despite the previously mentioned limitations, this data can provide consistent sets of statistics.

A belated albeit promising tourism development

Tourism has developed progressively since the beginning of the 1980s. The sector was aided by the rapid growth in the number of flights (Air France started a daily connection from Paris at the beginning of the 1970s), especially charter flights, and the emergence of hotel complexes in the resorts on the south of the island (such as La Pointe-du-Bout at the town of Trois-Ilets). The number of visitors exceeded 300,000 in 1985: short break tourists (55%), cruise ship tourists (approx 42%) and pleasure boat tourists (less than 7%). There was a constant growth until the middle of the 1990s (more than 750,000 visitors in 1991 and more than 950,000 in 1995). Short break tourism grew consistently until 1999 and the cruise tourism curve dipped in 1993 (the sector represented approximately 52% of visitors at this time). In 1998 Martinique recorded its highest number of visitors: 1,039,761, which provided tourism revenue of 315 million US dollars (Table 1).

| Table 1. The number of visitors to Martinique from 1985 to 2010 |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Short break tourists | 183,783 | 281,517 | 457,226 | 526,290 | 513,886 | 476,492 |
| Cruise ship passengers | 152,989 | 421,259 | 428,032 | 290,097 | 93,063  | 74,634  |
| Pleasure boat enthusiasts | 24,854  | 28,058  | 43,712  | 44,825  | 29,759  | **      |
| Other sightseers*      | –       | 2,524   | 9,150   | 67,525  | 32,111  | **      |
| Total                  | 361,626 | 733,358 | 938,120 | 928,737 | 639,000 | 618,607 |

* Other sightseers are those who travel from island to island (by air or by sea); ** Mean; unavailable.

Source: Martinique Tourism Authority.

At the end of the 1990s, tourism was the most important economic sector on the island, representing more than 10,000 jobs, i.e. over 10% of the active population. However, the rate of growth slowed down. Whereas other islands in the Antilles diversified in their choice of clientele and started to position themselves in the nearby North American markets, the French islands neglected the potential of the regional market by basing their success on a French clientele. In the middle of the 1990s intraregional competition began to take shape, mirroring Cuba’s increasing renown. Far from imagining the crisis that would hit the French West Indies, the views of the time remained optimistic: the islands would be in a position to withstand the strong competition from the Caribbean marketplace.

2 The arrival of the Boeing 747, the Minerve flights from Brussels, then Paris, next the drop in price after competition from such companies as Air OutreMer, Corse Air and Air Liberté.
The 21st century: when the crisis hits

The number of visitors to Martinique has continued to fall since 1998. The overall activity of the airport has provided clear evidence (1,518,400 passengers in 2004 compared to 1,665,963 in 1999) and the cruise ship sector has been hit the hardest by the crisis: less than 100,000 cruise ship passengers (from 151 ships) stopped off at the island in 2005. Gone is the time when Martinique received over 500 cruise ships (even 678 in 1991). Finally, the share from pleasure boat tourism remains insignificant, representing only 3.5% of all visitors (Dehoorne, 2007).

The change in the tourists’ geographic origins illustrates the recession affecting the sector. In 1987 visitors came from France and Europe (58.8% and 6.3% respectively), then North America (22.7%) and the Caribbean (11.2%). The growth in the 1990s was due to French visitors (70.8% in 1990), then European visitors (5.1%); the presence of North Americans diminished (12.5%). Their share was only 3.8% in 1998 (compared to 80.1% for French people). Of the 3 million recorded tourist nights in 2005, the share from the United States was only 0.8%, that from Canada was 1.1% and from Europe was 3.1%. The French dominate the sector with 87.5%, followed by Caribbean nationals with 7% (largely those living on neighbouring islands). The number of ‘French tourists’ originally from the Antilles (or emigrants on holiday) is noteworthy; the latter prefer to stay with family and friends (more than 40% of all tourist nights on the island).

The decline in the clientele from North America, the financial impact which was hidden due to the growth in the French market, heralded the redirection of tourism away from the French West Indies. These islands are no longer considered to be destinations at the forefront of the regional market; they have gone from initially offering upmarket tourism to offering mass tourism for one market – the French.

Tourism on Martinique

A wealth of resources

The tourism wealth of the island is based on the classic threefold model of sun, sea and sand (Sheller, 2003). The potential for tourism is important: Martinique is surrounded by 350 km of coastline (Desse and Saffache, 2005). Long beaches of white sand stretch out to the south, while coves and bays of differing size swap places along the eastern coast as far as the Caravelle Peninsula; beaches of black sand are more prevalent over the length of the northern coast. The unequal distribution of these more popular resources provides an explanation as to why the concentration of tourism flows benefits the southern coastline and extends to a number of Atlantic coastal sectors (cf. Figure 1). The mildness of the tropical maritime climate (averaging 26°C annually) is governed by the gentle rhythm of the ‘winter’ and ‘Lent’ seasons, and along with the volcanic and mountainous areas (covering 60% of the territory) and the diversity of the soil, has contributed to the biological wealth of the area and the particularities of the landscapes. The high altitude misty rainforests (with over 200 plant species) cover the northern slopes while the southern area contains arid zones, savannah, petrified forests and some strips of mangrove along the coast (1,850 hectares).

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3 Hot rainy season, July to November.
4 Dry season, December to June.
5 The eastern side, exposed to the wind, experiences a rainfall level 1,000 mm higher than that of the west side. The summit of Montagne Pelée records over five metres of rain per annum.
The wildlife potential is just as exciting; the island counts more than 1,700 species of flower, such as the multicoloured bougainvillea, hibiscus, Gabon tulip tree, orchid and wild anthurium, etc. The diversity of the forest (covering 43% of the island’s surface) and natural milieux is ideal for avifauna (over 235 species listed, permanent or migratory). Martinique possesses two natural reserves (the Caravelle peninsula on the eastern coast and the
Sainte Anne islets at the extreme south east of the island) and listed sites (such as the Montagne Pelée volcano). In terms of culture and heritage, many other resources (especially involving rum, Creole culture, etc.) are present on the island.

The tourism potentialities are great, but development of the sites for tourism has remained inadequate (Vellas, 1991). The existence of these resources has not been accompanied by a rational and coherent enhancement policy to meet the needs of tourism, for example, most tourists visit the Montagne Pelée site in less than thirty minutes (when the only onsite café is open) before continuing their ‘tour of the island’. The rudimentary development of many tourist sites is harmful to Martinique’s image and the lack of adequate improvement projects has provoked a gradual deterioration in the quality of sites without any prospects of economic advance.

**Tourism concentrated on the Southern Coasts**

Tourism is very concentrated in certain districts of Martinique. The more mountainous districts on the north of the island (which face rural depopulation) have little to do with the tourism phenomenon. Indeed, only 2% of the Martiniquean territory has a high number of visitors and 10%, a significant number. The hotel sector illustrates this point; the island currently offers 12,200 beds and three fifths of these are concentrated in four southern boroughs (Trois-Îlets, Sainte-Anne, Sainte-Luce and Diamant; cf. Figures 2 and 3). Of course, at the centre of each of these towns the hotels are grouped together in specific micro territories. Gites (268 accommodation units with 904 beds) and guest houses (948 beds) complete the range of commercial accommodation available and they follow the same spatial rationale. Of a total of 7.5 million recorded tourist nights, three quarters were spent at the southern rim of the island, in the Fort-de-France bay area and in some parts of the southern Atlantic coast.

The extreme concentration of tourism practices in the area has resulted in a loss in appeal; in addition to the inadequacy of the facilities (insufficient or inexistent parking, basic sanitation), the concentration of flows has caused problems: the main roads are congested during the weekends and school holidays and 4x4s drive across supposedly ‘protected’ coastal vegetation zones as an alternative. The site of the Salines beach (the most renowned beach on the island at Sainte-Anne) attracts more than two million people per year (cf. Figure 2 and 3). Resort based activities have now spread to the local society who have opted to camp in the forests next to the beaches. Each new local recreational pursuit becomes an additional activity within international tourism, itself contributing the equivalent of 21,000 extra people per day. These new realities explain why tourists sometimes feel that the beaches have become crowded and too noisy. The quality of sites has deteriorated and there has been no significant benefit to the economy. Property speculation is widespread at the most sought after coastal districts (one hundred square kilometres) and illegal dwellings are being constructed on protected zones and on publicly owned tracts of coastal land.

On the less popular parts of the island, for example, along the north western coasts, several hotel complexes from the 1980s have closed. The receiving capacity of the hotel sector has decreased (4,700 rooms in 109 establishments in 2005 compared to 8,733 rooms in 117 establishments in 1998) and the spatial imbalances have been accentuated.

To a certain degree this major tourism pull towards the southern coastline reflects the ability of the main resources (beaches of white sand and lagoons) to attract people. However, the shortage of facilities and the consequent gradual deterioration of currently overvisited sites has created concerns about economic recovery and the durability of tourism on the island.
Figure 2. Reception capacity and tourist nights at the Island of Martinique (Lesser Antilles)

Source: Comité Martiniquais du Tourisme (CMT).
Tourism within the Martinique economy

From the beginning of the 21st century, the reduction in tourist visits also led to a loss in revenue: 263.2 million euros in 2000, then 222.5 million euros in 2005 (cf. IEDOM, Institut d’Emission des Départements d’Outre-Mer). The overall decrease in tourism went hand in hand with a loss in the island’s reputation; the current clientele is...
middle class and consequently the average tourism earnings go down (99.5 euros earned per room occupied in 2003 compared to 127.3 euros in 1999. Despite this decline, tourism earnings continue to make up 23.8% of total spending in local shops. The economic issues around tourism are considerable for the French West Indies.

**Tourism revenue and the knock-on effects**

Based on the data from 1997, it appears that wealth accrued from foreign tourism consumption reached 219.6 million euros, i.e. 7% of market GDP (compared to 4% in 1985 and 5.9% in 1994) and that it involved more than one thousand businesses (Para et al., 2003). Foreign tourism spending generates 65.8 million euros of imports, which is more than Martinique's total exports (114% of exports) and subsequently leaves a balance of 242 million euros in the local economy (Para et al., 2003).

The knock-on effect from tourism consumption is fundamental for the Martinique economy: one euro spent directly by a tourist generates 0.6 euros of production for the other sectors and each directly related job creates an additional 0.5 jobs. In the final analysis, one euro of added value directly resulting from international tourism earnings equates to 1.6 euros (Para et al., 2003). Thus if we use a base figure of 380 euros of tourism spending (equivalent to the average spending of a tourist staying on Martinique), 263 euros remains in Martinique and creates 171 euros of wealth.

**Table 2. Tourism spending on Martinique in 2002 (in millions of euros)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Short break tourism</th>
<th>Pleasure boat</th>
<th>Cruise</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Share in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle hire</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excursions/Leisure</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shops</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>200.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>8.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>212.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Martinique Tourism Authority.

Direct tourism spending is especially linked to short break tourism (95%); the share from pleasure boat and cruise tourism is very small (3.5% and 2% respectively). Tourism consumption by local people greatly adds to this spending. Already in 1997 it was revealed that 60% of tourism production was from domestic tourism (Para et al., 2003). If you then take into account the decline in national and international activity in the tourism sector, since the beginning of the 21st century it is obvious that domestic tourism is experiencing a constant growth. Tourism marketing campaigns have notably targeted the local population with specific rates for ‘residents.’ But consumption differs according to tourists’ geographical origins; the main items of expenditure for national and international tourists are transport, accommodation (mostly hotels) and eating out whereas tourism consumption by locals focuses firstly on eating out and shopping, then on accommodation.
Tourism and employment in Martinique

In 1997 the tourism sector provided 6,540 jobs, i.e. 5.4% of all active employees, and 26% of retail services. In 2002 it involved 2,265 businesses and more than 9,900 jobs, i.e. nearly 8.2% of the active employed population (IEDOM, 2014). Studies have shown that 130 tourists spending 180 euros each on Martinique create one job in the Martinique economy and bring in 111 euros of public earnings. The principle sources of employment are accommodation (with a figure of 34% of jobs officially declared in 2000), catering (22.9% of jobs) and transport (12.9%).

At the beginning of the 1990s, jobs in the tourism sector were primarily within the deluxe hotel sector (0.5 jobs per room in deluxe hotels, 1,300 jobs in 1991), the small to medium sized hotel sector (0.33 jobs per room, 500 in 1991) and catering (on average 4.3 jobs per establishment, approximately 950 people) (IEDOM, 2014), not forgetting the transport sectors (1,400 jobs) divided up between taxis (343), coastal navigation, airlines, private car hire, travel agencies and a number of recreational workers. More than 7,500 people worked in the hotel and catering sectors in 1998. Certainly the levels of remuneration were low overall, but it has to be remembered that over 60% of those employed were unqualified and that the above jobs required little in the way of qualifications.

The gradual decline in tourism (reduction in the volume of tourist nights, closing of hotel complexes, revenue deficits) caused a loss of 2,000 jobs in the space of two years (2000 to 2002), then 1,200 to 1,500 more between 2003 and 2005. These losses have occurred to a background of economic crisis; Martinique has more than 38,000 jobseekers compared to fewer than 125,000 occupied jobs (end of 2004). And yet tourism trades, identified by their strong seasonality and their extreme flexibility, also provide a first experience of work to young people facing unemployment. During the reopening of Club Med on Martinique, the management team received more than 1,000 applications in a few days for 50 job offers. The crisis in the tourism sector has heightened the tense social climate on the island.

Tourism as a primary activity for the Martinique economy

As Martinique's most important export sector, tourism finances 18% of the external trade deficit. The net external earnings total 244 million euros. If we take into account the economic difficulties encountered by the island, the issues around tourism are key. Indeed, prospects for the industrial sector are very limited as this sector only employs 15% of the active population. The only two large companies are ‘Electricité de France’ (EDF) with one of the biggest power station in the Caribbean, and the ‘Société Anonyme de Raffinage des Antilles’ (SARA) who refine and distribute oil products that are destined for the French West Indies. The tertiary sector represents approximately 75% of jobs on Martinique with nearly half in the non-commercial public sector.

A traditionally important source of jobs, the agricultural sector now only employs 7.6% of the active population and it is in second place when it comes to the island's exports. Bananas and rum are its main areas of production; the manufacture of rum is the number one agro-industrial activity on Martinique (8% of export earnings), with 12 distilleries which represent 17 brands. Banana production still requires 8,500 hectares (i.e. 25% of the utilised agricultural area), but its future appears gloomy with the freeing up of the market - the insular territory producers are not in a position to stand up to the competition from the large Latin American plantations. The loss of employment becomes clearer in a sector that represents 40% of the final agricultural production and continues to employ 80%

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6 Tourism consumption at 307 million euros and resulting imports of 66 million euros.
of the farming population. In the rural areas to the north of the island which have been hit by the banana crisis, the debate about tourism development has become a priority: it is about promoting rural tourism with home-based accommodation facilities.

If the current decline can be partly explained by the limited enhancement of local resources and the lack of consideration for the real economic issues involved in tourism, the current economic crisis (an employment rate of over 24%, more than 45% of those unemployed without work for at least a year) must lead to a re-evaluation of the development issues surrounding tourism.

The tourism crisis on Martinique: lessons and prospects for the future

An intensified regional competition

The major selling points for the Caribbean Islands rely on a standard representation of the ‘tropics’, essentially reduced to the ‘3Ss’ (sun, sea and sand) and a fourth S (sex) for the powerhouse destinations in the region (Cuba, Dominican Republic and Jamaica). The disparities in wealth of these societies play a part in fuelling the rivalry; the more developed islands vaunt their safety benefits (physical, food and health generally), but they have to assimilate higher wage costs. Conversely, developing islands are selling cheaper holiday breaks, partly due to their lower wage bills and often with the added benefit of less restrictive environmental laws.

Under these circumstances the French West Indies, where the standard of living is one of the best in the region, has encountered serious problems. Inflation, along with the high living costs and the important place of the middle classes, practically non-existent on other islands, has currently created serious limitations in terms of funding and salary levels. The average pay for employees who work in the tourism sector is the highest in the region. The price of the holiday stays cannot compete with the leading Caribbean competitors. By way of an example, when a hotel complex on the neighbouring island of Saint Lucia employs one person per room and the wage bill only represents 20% of the hotel’s turnover, the larger establishments of the French West Indies have only 0.25 jobs per room and salaries reach 40 to 45% of turnover.

Having been protected for a long time by their privileged position on the French market, the French West Indies were surprised by the boom in the regional marketplace; it is important to remember that during the 1990 to 2002 period, the annual rates of tourism growth were 9.4% and 14.3% respectively for the Dominican Republic and Cuba compared to 3.1% for Martinique.

Since the middle of the 1990s, the loyalty from the French tourists has waned. They have varied their tourism experiences and favoured the more attractive offers from the bigger Caribbean islands. This being the case, one of the keys to managing the approaching crisis would be to open new air links. Indeed, the hub airport that was being established at the end of the 1980s has become a cul-de-sac with its single exit leading to Orly airport in Paris. The intensification of tourism on these islands to the benefit of the French market has led to the gradual closing of air links to the United States and Canada.

The question of air links and opening new flights to North America is crucial, but it has to be accompanied by a new strategic positioning in the marketplace. At the moment, hotel complexes cannot revive their offer because they are aging through lack of significant investment, and mass tourism is moving to emerging destinations in the region.
An inadequate commitment

Development levels are very inadequate when it comes to site potentialities. Although blessed with outstanding resources (beaches and lagoons), not enough has been done to enhance the area: few sports and recreational opportunities, limited amenities, poorly adapted shopping facilities, and cultural and evening entertainment in very short supply. Tourism as an activity is subsisting at the level of a ‘gathering’ economy, “Our resources are unique so that’s enough to attract tourists”. One outcome from this situation is a feeling of dissatisfaction by tourists who pick up on this impression of boredom. Value for money is therefore lower on the French islands.

It is sometimes baffling to hear the views that seek to justify insufficient development through lack of means. Suffice it to review certain reports that set out the state of affairs a decade earlier (IEDOM, 1993), for example, in 2006 there was still talk of launching tourism products that would focus on health and hydrotherapy – the original discussions were in 1990. In 1993 the exploitation of natural resources had already begun with a budget reaching 17 million US dollars (IEDOM, 1993). Thirteen years on there is no trace of ‘hydrotherapy tourism’ and the project remains confined to the ‘new ideas in times of crisis’ pile. Another example of this gap between proposed developments and completed developments is the Saint-Pierre tourist spot located on the ruins of the city destroyed by the volcanic eruption in 1902; this received 95% funding from public finances. By the end of 1989, more than 90% of the 6.5 million US dollars from the programme were committed to improving the site and instituting strategies for the American market. Twenty five years later, the problems are the same, but the money has gone.

The ineffectiveness of development projects and the inability to optimise allocated funds over the last two decades have sadly failed the tourism sector of today and how these projects were conducted is all the more delicate since they are rapidly becoming the subject of controversy. Based on very partisan motives, ‘independence and ecology’ movements have readily cited ecological arguments; they mean to control access to resources in the face of an ‘invasion’ from ‘undesirables’. The environment and the management of resources have to a large extent been used as a justification. Different interest groups have agreed on the necessity of preserving the environment in its present state and of limiting access. And yet, all things considered, it appears that the ‘undeveloped’ areas and therefore those areas open to ‘wild’ practices from interior tourism have worryingly been more consistently damaged than tourist areas that have been developed and regulated. Martiniqueian tourism practices on the island have been more detrimental to coastal ecosystems: all terrain vehicles happily drive through the undergrowth alongside the beaches, trees are being cut down because of the demand for places to camp in the wild, people light fires, etc. After the traditional Easter weekends and the long holiday period over July and August, staff from the National Forest Office spends their time collecting all kinds of rubbish left on the beaches. There is an undoubted risk of reduced attractiveness when increasing damage and a particular lack of awareness amongst local people is taken into account.

An urbanised Island losing its attractiveness

Martinique is experiencing increasing anthropic pressures. There are almost 382,000 inhabitants (spread over 1,100 km² in 1999) distributed very unequally throughout the island. The ‘Foyalais’ capital and suburbs along with the southern bank of the Fort-de-France Bay contain over 40% of the island’s population and over 50% if you include the semi-urban periphery. Those coastal towns where tourism is at its heaviest on the southern half of the island account for another quarter of the population. 75% of the people of Martinique are concentrated on 40% of the land (the plains and the lowlands in the centre and south of the island) and the average density of this
urban space (alternating pockets of high density and vast areas occupied by the occasional private house) is 750 inhabitants per km².

This situation has accelerated the damage to environmental resources (cf. Figure 4). In addition to the sewerage systems being outdated, there are not enough of them: 45% of homes are not connected in urban zones and more than 60% in semi-urban and rural zones. The discharge of inadequately treated waste water adds to pollution in the coastal waters. The deterioration in the bathing areas does harm to the destination and occasionally requires beaches to be closed without warning (like the Madiana beach at Schoelcher).

Figure 4. Degree of urbanization and ecosystem decay
Source: map realized by the authors, field datas collected – personal datas.
The situation is particularly acute on the transport side. Road networks have not kept pace with the new population distributions. The 315 kilometres of national roads and seven kilometres of motorway (out of a total of 2,000 km of road) carry a daily average load of 100,000 vehicles. It is possible to lose up to two to three hours through traffic jams on a 50 kilometre stretch of a daily commute. Martinique does not have a sufficiently developed system of public transport. Each year the situation worsens and much is the surprise of a tourist finding him/herself unimaginably stuck in the middle of a traffic jam. Urbanisation continues and farmland has experienced extensive reconversions following property market transactions (cf. Figure 4).

A shortage of space, a diluting of rural landscapes through peri-urbanisation, saturated road systems and an accumulation of domestic waste (accounts for 60% of the 235,000 tons of waste per year) have become the stark realities for an island that finds itself with cracks in its tourism appeal.

Finally, economic and social crises also impact on this weakening of the destination. The lack of ‘social housing’, unemployment levels and general instability are so many elements that play their part in heightening social tensions on an island where more than 63,000 people (17% of the population) live below the poverty line. Martinique has more than 30,000 on minimum benefits and 500 with no fixed abode. The tensions result in an increased number of strikes (in 2004 the island suffered from its highest number of working days lost – 26,830). Better trained young people facing unemployment are reclaiming their rightful place in society; they no longer want to accept a future involving a move to mainland France where prospects are uncertain.

Violence on the roads and minor delinquency have a role in creating an unsafe environment; petty crime is mainly organized in tourist areas such as Trois-Ilets, the centre of Fort-de-France and the beaches at Sainte-Anne (Carmel, 2006).

Tourism in Martinique society: going beyond the contradictions

The relationship between tourists and host societies is particularly complex in the French West Indies. These two worlds rub shoulders without acknowledging each other and contact is limited to the purchasing of goods and services. Any reflection on the tourism crisis afflicting the French West Indies today cannot hold back on examining the realities of the societies in these host territories.

Local debates on tourism are especially contradictory. Disapproval is expressed both about the entrenchment of tourists and their invasive presence, and about the superiority that their money gives them without the spending to back it up. The comments concerning “ordinary hatred” can be read in the local press; advertising campaigns from air transport companies (requested for so long) are also considered to be “the worst possible disaster for Martinique”, a “real stab in the back for tourism policy because those types of prices will attract rucksack tourists with zero purchasing power and hence damage the image of the destination. The island’s tourism has certainly been reduced to the point of vagrancy and the door is open to more unemployed people, delinquents, drug users, prostitution and other microbial or viral diseases” (Antilla, no. 1010, 2002). The ideal would be to have “tourists’ money without the tourists”.

Beyond these isolated xenophobic sentiments, tourism is developing against the backdrop of a complex society, very sensitive to terms like ‘servitude’ or ‘flunkeyism’. Bearing in mind the history of these islands and how they were extremely marked by slavery, a long period of European colonisation and by power struggles, within certain population categories exists a deep disgust for ‘personal services’, and yet the tourism offer is a personalised service. This personalisation of the service, linked to the lure of profit, is not very widespread amongst local workers.
who would prefer an office job that carries more prestige. Tourism services have been associated with the infamous 'flunkeyism' and these feelings can be compounded by the attitude of certain tourists insensitive to local nuances. This apprehension is widely maintained and reinforced by political leaders whose pro-independence speeches advocate breaking away from this system and rejecting it.

The crisis in Martinique’s tourism then appears to be part of a misunderstanding that has been skilfully preserved to the point of becoming an anachronism. The newly arrived immigrant contributes to a ‘genocide through substitution’; a number of decades earlier this expression effectively meant something, but today, with the integration of these territories into both the national and European context alongside the greatly increased mobility of the islanders, it comes across as being a twisted anachronism that does not help create an atmosphere conducive to the island’s development, especially as the leaders who use this type of expression are generally public servants in the pay of the French state.

The people who live on these islands are far from having a coherent society. The lingering power struggles and the subtle games played by different interest groups lead to compromises and other weak coalitions. Among the main groups is the example of the ‘békés’ (descendents of white colonialists), whose superior finance and land is a throwback to colonial times on the island. Their relative discretion on the political scene has taken nothing away from their significant influence on the island’s elected members, themselves confronted by the social and economic problems of their electorate on a daily basis. The islands also have new elites with their own initiatives, but the divisions are strong. The most impoverished make up a ‘stock’ of citizens who are easy to mobilise (and manipulate) and who find themselves at the mercy of promises made by the leaders. The ‘autonomist movement’ (who extol the virtues of autonomy in the European context) are in opposition to the ‘independence movement’, and ‘defending ecology’ is often the pretext for Sunday demonstrations against such and such a position. In this way compromises are made and unmade and the improvement programmes go nowhere.

**Conclusion**

Since the end of the 1990s, tourism has undergone a noticeable recession in the French West Indies where the effect has been a net loss in clients and the dilapidation of structures within a background of strong regional competition. Paradoxically, the local population do not seem to be aware of the issues facing the future of the islands.

Beyond the standard considerations involved in implementing both tourism programmes and marketing strategies, the existing crisis in the French West Indies asks questions about the real desire for tourism and more generally, the acceptance of the fact that the ‘other’ is there. The positioning of local societies with regard to the role and benefits of tourism remains vague and yet, on an economic level and allowing for the current context, the sector could fully contribute to defining a truly comprehensive development strategy for the French West Indies. A revival in tourism consumption could quickly restore the two thousand jobs that are no longer in the sector and bring about a modest gain of a thousand jobs.

The islands must reconsider their position within the regional marketplace. If the decline in mass coastal resort tourism is unavoidable, keeping a significant number of these clients remains vital in making a profit on transport services and tourism logistics. Other possibilities have been contemplated such as the upmarket tourism market structured around a number of luxury amenities and encouraged by the overall levels of security throughout the territory – a particular advantage given the unpredictability of certain competing destinations in the Caribbean.
region. There is also a large consensus on ecotourism (Breton (ed.), 2001), but the way forward is still unclear. The choice of the ongoing developments corresponds more to protective measures, in a way making ecotourism appear a legitimate excuse for denying access to sites and not attempting to involve local people.

The tourism crisis in the French West Indies has revealed a malaise within society. The search for identity comes up against the effects of globalisation, both economic and cultural, that tourism flows epitomise. The complex and contradictory alliances re-form according to the opportunities that present themselves in these development oriented territories.

Accordingly, tourist situation in Martinique can be called paradoxical as illustrated by the facts: flows have declined for 15 years (less visitors, less income, difficulties of hotel and closure of several hotels, reduction of flights). This tourism industry declines in the context of a steady tourist growth of competing neighboring destinations. While current politicians are trying to straighten up the flows, the tourist' tools are aging, become inefficient, investments fail, the image of the tourist destination is deteriorated. Tourism industry does not reveal a simple technique, an engineering of economic mechanisms. The depth of this tourist crisis shows the importance of social and political facts and issues (even under the tropical sun!).

References

Antilla Journal, no. 1014, 14th November 2002.
http://web.martiniquetourism.com (the Martinique Tourism Authority website. It contains information about the classic offers as well as statistics on tourism).


