

Discourses of the Past, Discourses of the Present: Heritage Tourism in Latin America

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Objectives | Heritage tourism—engaging with sites, material culture, or intangible culture deemed historical repositories—is one of tourism’s fastest-growing segments. But “heritage” is not a social construction situated exclusively in the past. It is often based on discourses of the present, constructed with categories that serve interests rooted in today’s unequal power dynamics.

This paper explores heritage tourism embedded in past and present discourses using the example of Ecuador. I study former President Rafael Correa Delgado’s (2007-2017) heritage tourism policies during his self-proclaimed Citizen’s Revolution (*Revolución Ciudadana*). I focus on one of Correa’s emblematic tourism projects: the reconstruction of the Ecuadorian railway system between 2008 and 2013. This regime used the railway system reconstruction project to build a unified national identity around their Citizen’s Revolution and the concept of *Buen Vivir*, an approach to socialism that embraces the ancestral and communitarian knowledge of the Quichua indigenous peoples. I propose that, just as the original railroad system had been built to unify the country in the early 20th century, its reconstruction 100 years later as a tourism attraction had similar political and cultural objectives under the banner of “21st-century socialism.”

Methodology | This paper is based on ethnographic research between 2014 and 2023. I conducted participant observation on board the Tren Crucero in 2014 and on four of the five main thematic routes (2014-2018). In 2023, I visited some of the unused stations once the project had been closed for tourism. Between 2014 and 2023, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with key officials of the railway system, tour guides, and domestic and international tourists.

Main Results and Contributions | The Ecuadorian railway is unlike any other railroad system in Latin America because of Ecuador’s rugged topography and the degree of national integration that it generated in a previously fragmented nation. Congressional authorization for building the railway system was obtained by conservative president Gabriel García Moreno in 1861. However, by the time of Moreno’s assassination in 1875, only 45km of track had been laid. There was little additional progress until the late 1890s when José Eloy Alfaro Delgado, the leader of the Liberal

Revolution, took up the project. This Revolution (1895 to 1925) led to one of Ecuador's most important political, economic, and cultural transformations. In fifteen years, the Revolution secularized public education and cemeteries declared freedom of religion, promulgated civil marriage and divorce laws, and nationalized religious orders' properties. The railroad (inaugurated on Alfaro's birthday on June 25, 1908) exemplifies the Liberal Revolution's economic and social achievements.

In the latter part of the 20th century, Ecuador changed in ways that diminished the railroad's value. The country's economy up to the 1970s had been based primarily on exporting bananas, coffee, and cacao. When oil production and exportation became Ecuador's central economic engine, the state focused on constructing roads to facilitate oil transportation, enhance commerce, and accommodate population growth.

By the 1990s, the railroad was sinking into irrelevance. President Correa gave it a new lease on life through his vision of marketing it as a heritage tourism attraction. This massive undertaking required the reconstruction of 507 km of railway. With an investment of USD 340 million, the project focused on rehabilitating ways and stations, restructuring the public management corporation, and creating community-based tourism products. There were five one-day thematic routes through the Andean and coastal provinces and one multi-day excursion. At its peak in 2015, the railway system had more than 30 stations, 23 cafés, 14 handicraft markets, and 13 local museums, providing more than 5,000 direct and 15,000 indirect jobs and involving 180 micro-enterprises. Approximately 200,000 tourists traversed the Andes aboard the renovated trains.

In the early 20th century, General Alfaro's railroad system generated a discourse about a collective national project, a significant exercise in constructing the Ecuadorian nation-state. The railroad was framed as a redemptive work because it was believed to be a way to "resurrect" and emancipate Ecuadorians morally. For liberals, the railroad represented the "light of progress" that the "obscure" ways of conservatism had repressed. Over a century later, Correa's administration used the same metaphor while he molded his image after Alfaro. The railroad restoration project amplified Correa's political ideology for transforming Ecuador into a 21st-century socialist nation-state.

Conclusions | Heritage can connect tourism, economy, and culture with nation branding. The Correa regime's railroad reconstruction project fits this pattern perfectly, as it converted a disused and abandoned artefact of Ecuador's heritage into a symbol of a transformative political era.

However, even if it is heritage-, community- or conservation-based, tourism growth risks being co-opted by the state when it becomes its major champion. The reconstruction of the railway system for tourism and heritage purposes was an iconic component of Ecuador's Buen Vivir nation branding. As important as the economics of tourism were to the government, social and political

considerations provided more significant incentives; tourism became a means to cement the government's political platform—thus establishing a memorable branding for the nation.

The Ecuadorian railway became a highly contentious political project; it remained so under successive administrations (Lenin Moreno, 2017-2021, and Guillermo Lasso, 2021-present), which let the project slowly die. While economic reasons, such as the fall of oil prices (2014-2021) and the global COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), played a role in the demise of the system, the intentional neglect to which it was subjected after Correa left power in 2017 speaks to how this project was seen as representative of his administration. The system's vulnerability was profoundly tied to its emblematic nature for this regime.

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