Latin America is one of the most diverse regions in the world. It comprises a rich mosaic of histories, environments and cultures that give rise to extraordinary depth and diversity of tourism products and experiences. Traditional and contemporary attitudes and values played out in political, economic and social spheres have meant that tourism has developed in remarkably different ways in different countries. As a result, tourism in Latin America is a montage of traditional and contemporary products and experiences, of market forces and central government planning, and of aggressive promotion and serendipity. Perhaps because of this complexity, holistic attempts to capture an understanding of tourism in Latin America have not generally been forthcoming.

Tourism in Latin America is an introductory text, principally aimed at students of tourism and hospitality although the authors claim that it may also provide a useful introduction for a variety of other students. The book has three principal aims:

1. To offer an introductory but nevertheless comprehensive text about a region which is developing tourism for a global market.

2. To introduce the core principles which underpin the business of tourism and to apply them to tourism in Latin America.

3. To discuss a range of major issues affecting tourism development, and in particular, the impacts of tourism.

In addressing these aims, the book is divided into three parts. The first is an overview of Latin America and a discussion of the range of contextual factors that have shaped the development of
tourism in the region. The second part is a discussion of the ‘tourism offering’, a term coined by the
authors as a result of their dissatisfaction with widespread terms such as product and experience (p.
59). The third part examines key impacts in the development of tourism in Latin America.

In the authors’ words, ‘the book sets out to explore the tourism offering of Latin America and to look
at the future potential of this vast continent. Whilst not intended to be a geographic study, nor an
anthropological survey, political overview, or cultural analysis, it draws on a wide range of
interdisciplinary research in order to provide an overview of Latin America’ (p.ix). Put simply, the
authors tell us what the book is not. It is not a geographic analysis, nor is it an anthropological,
political or cultural expose of Latin American tourism. Relying on the descriptor ‘interdisciplinary’
relieves the authors of having to examine more closely what sort of literature was relied upon and
the contribution of the book beyond that of description. In this sense, ‘interdisciplinary’ is a throw
away line. A grab bag of literature is used, sometimes quite selectively, to support a certain position
or argument. Perhaps more attention to the contributions of the different disciplines and fields of
studies relied upon, and their interrelationships, would enable the authors to develop a tighter
structure to the book and to identify its contribution beyond simple description of tourism in the
region.

Tourism in Latin America is an integrated text (p.ix). The authors have elected to deal with Latin
America as a region and not on a country-by-country basis. This decision creates significant
challenges for the authors given that Latin America is, arguably, one of the richest and most diverse
regions in the world, culturally, socially, politically and environmentally. Generalisations can cause
problems, and in many instances, the authors are careful to acknowledge that their generalisations
are not applicable to certain countries.

Whilst the book makes a genuine attempt at integrating the vastly different tourism contexts of each
county, there are some concerns with the approach. First, there is a superficial and somewhat
selective use of tourism literature, and a notable absence of reference to literature that deals, in
more profound ways with, for example, the complexities of attractions and attraction complexes,
‘otherness’ and sense of place, and institutional arrangements for tourism. Given the lack of English
language literature about Latin American tourism, the opportunity exists to present a book that is an
insightful reflection upon rich body of English language literature emerging about tourism theory
and practice and its application to Latin America. However, there is little meaningful engagement with tourism literature other than case study material. In an introductory text, at least some engagement with the complexities of tourism literature is useful, and arguably, essential, if the interest and curiosity of the student is to be stimulated.

Secondly, at times the book hovers between being an introductory tourism text and a thinly disguised description of the authors’ travel in the region. In some instances the book reads more like a travel guide than a text:

Designer clothing and other up-market branded goods are to be found in the Calle Florida in Buenos Aires and the centre of Bogata. Other purchases tend to fall into the ‘handicrafts’ category, and in this respect, the best cities are Cuzco, Lima and Puno (Peru), Caracas (Venezuela), Asuncion (Paraguay), La Paz and Tarabaco (Bolivia).... Chile and (northern) Argentina tend to specialize in clothing and rugs... Leather goods, including jackets, handbags and footwear, are to be found in Argentina... (p. 154).

Thirdly, in order to justify some observations the authors rely on questionable research such as a survey of information received and response times from Latin American embassies (pp. 74–75). The real concern here is that undergraduate students, especially those in the early years, are often still developing vital skills such as independent thinking and critical judgement. These students may take this research on face value, resulting in two main consequences: (1) it reinforces the view (especially among students from the more traditional disciplines that service tourism) that tourism is not a serious academic endeavour, and (2) that quick and easy surveys of response times to requests for tourism information for example, are standard research methods.

Fourth, there is some concern over the accuracy of certain information. For example:

Whilst anthropologists and archaeologists have been studying civilisations (both past and present) for some 200 years, it is only within the last 30–40 years that culture has become a focus of interest and entertainment for the tourist’ (p. 128).

Cultural tourism in Latin America can be divided into two basic categories: contemporary and historical. Whilst this is an arbitrary division, it does nevertheless, reflect the basic distinction
between the ‘old’ (pre Columbian) civilizations and the ‘new’ (post-conquest) civilizations of Latin America (p. 128).

Indeed, many historical pre-Columbian attractions and events have been adapted for contemporary appeal making this distinction meaningless. Museums can be both historical attractions while the architecture can have contemporary attraction. Traditional events have been modified to expand contemporary appeal, often at the expense of the original significance. Broad simplified classifications such as these are not only open to debate, but can mislead undergraduate students, some of whom have a frustrating tendency to accept literature unquestioningly.

In sum, Tourism in Latin America provides some insight into the development of tourism in this diverse and colourful region. The authors make broad conclusions regarding the challenges faced by Latin American countries in developing tourism to attract the increasingly discerning, quality conscious and environmentally aware tourism markets. However, one should be aware that the authors are describing tourism in Latin America through a looking glass. Rarely do we get a sense of what it is like to be engaged in tourism development in this extraordinarily complex region. Students would do well to supplement this book with other critical literature, such as Chomsky and Dieterich (1999), to address this imbalance.

References

Chomsky and Dieterich 1999