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Events and meetings tourism in the city of Havana: analysis and prospects

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Abstract

The Meetings tourism, known by its acronym MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions), has become one of the most important areas of tourism in the world, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions), has become one of the most dynamic areas in the global of the most dynamic areas of the global tourism sector. This research seeks to generate knowledge about the potential of the city of Havana for meetings and Havana for meetings and events tourism as one of the strategies for the recovery of the tourism sector in Cuba. the recovery of the tourism sector in Cuba. The methodology used was a case study, which focuses on intensive analysis through qualitative research, combining qualitative research, combining the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data for a descriptive and descriptive and quantitative data for a descriptive and contextual approach, which allowed for a reach results useful for decision making. The findings and The findings and conclusions can be instrumental in formulating effective strategies that address the underlying causes of the crisis and promote sustainable tourism recovery. tourism recovery.

Keywords: *Meetings Tourism, Development; Potential Features; City of Havana*

1. Introduction

Havana, the capital of Cuba, has achieved a notable presence as one of the most prominent tourist destinations in the Caribbean, as it currently receives more than half of all foreign visitors to the country. This trend has been consolidated thanks to a series of factors that go beyond the traditional offerings of beaches and climate, inherent characteristics of its status as a Caribbean island. Cuba's tourism strategy has been based on the exploitation of its natural resources; however, in recent years, Havana has diversified its offer by incorporating cultural, historical and entertainment elements.

In June 2016, Havana was declared one of the Seven Wonder Cities of the World by UNESCO, a recognition that highlights its immense historical and cultural value, as well as its attractiveness as a tourist destination. Old Havana stands out for its cobblestone streets and its impressive collection of colonial buildings dating from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The Plaza de la Catedral, with its majestic baroque cathedral, and the emblematic Malecón, which hugs the coastline, are just two examples of the spaces that fascinate visitors. In addition, the city is an open-air museum where the old and the new coexist in perfect harmony, and street art and contemporary galleries add a new dimension to the cultural experience.

Havana is captivating not only for its architecture and landscapes, but also for its people. The warmth of the people of Havana, their contagious music and exquisite Cuban cuisine make every visit an unforgettable encounter. The rhythms of salsa and son resonate in every corner, creating a festive atmosphere that reflects the essence of Cuban culture. All these characteristics make Havana a place where historians, music and gastronomy lovers find reasons to marvel. The city has experienced an increase in national and foreign investment in hotel and recreational infrastructure, which has improved the quality of services offered. These transformations have been key to positioning Havana as a competitive destination within the Caribbean tourism market, especially in a global context where the search for unique and authentic experiences is becoming increasingly relevant for travellers. Despite these initiatives, tourism in Cuba has suffered a serious deterioration in recent years due to factors affecting both supply and demand (Ginsburg, M., 2022; Rodríguez, R., 2023; Castellanos, L. P., 2023). These include:

- The US economic embargo, which limits foreign investment and access to technologies and markets.

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-The energy crisis, which hampers the functioning of basic services and tourism infrastructure.

-The lack of maintenance and renovation of hotel and recreational facilities, which reduces the quality and competitiveness of the tourism product.

On the other hand, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rethinking of strategies for the promotion of events and meetings tourism. Adaptation to new health regulations and the promotion of sustainable tourism are beginning to take centre stage, with the aim of not only recovering the flow of visitors, but also preserving the natural and cultural resources that make Havana a unique destination.

Materials and Methods:

The case study is a scientific research methodology that consists of an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon, a context, a situation or a specific problem based on various sources of information and through the use of data collection and analysis techniques (Guetterman, T. C., & Fetters, M. D., 2018). Through a qualitative approach, an in-depth understanding of a complex and unique phenomenon in its natural context is sought through a holistic and interpretative analysis of the research context. This methodology has been developed and expanded to other fields of science, so it is no longer the exclusive heritage of the social sciences, to which it owes its origin.

In this way, it is widely used in the field of tourism, as it is very suitable for exploring, describing or explaining situations that cannot be dealt with experimentally and that present a wide variety of interrelated factors that require an integrative and comprehensive perspective (Larrinaga and Rodríguez, 2010).

This article has focused on analysing information from different public and private institutional sources, and on consulting experts from academic institutions and professionals in the tourism sector, in order to answer the research questions, understand and analyse the data from different perspectives and identify patterns, trends or relationships between variables. Reliability was determined using Cronbach's alpha statistic of a Likert-type attitude scale in the SPSS statistical package (Rodríguez-Rodríguez, J. and Reguant-Alvarez, M., 2020).

Theoretical foundations of the research: Meetings tourism, known by its acronym MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions), has become one of the most dynamic areas of the tourism sector worldwide (Smagina, N., 2017; Martins, D., Silva, S., Jardim, C. and Silva, C., 2024). This modality not only encompasses the organisation of meetings and conferences, but also corporate incentives and exhibitions, which makes it an essential component for the economic development of tourist destinations.

The importance of meeting tourism lies in its ability to attract a specific audience seeking suitable venues for events. Cities specialising in MICE tend to invest in modern infrastructure, such as convention centres, hotels with conference rooms and advanced technological services. This not only enhances the attendees' experience, but also fosters competitiveness among destinations, as companies and institutions tend to choose those that offer better facilities and services.

In addition, MICE tourism has a multiplier effect on the local economy. Events attract professionals from different sectors who, in addition to needing accommodation, require complementary services such as transport, food and recreational activities, which generates an important flow of income for local businesses, from restaurants to transport companies, boosting the economic growth of the area.

On the other hand, the social and cultural impact of meeting tourism should not be underestimated. These events foster the exchange of knowledge and experience, and promote collaboration between different sectors and the creation of professional networks. They can also serve as platforms to promote local culture, integrating activities that showcase the destination's heritage and traditions.

Results and Discussion

Main attributes of the physical-geographical environment of Havana

Havana is a province located in the west of Cuba, which has played a fundamental role in the history and development of the country. It is bordered to the north by the Strait of Florida, to the east and south by the province of Mayabeque and to the west by the province of Artemisa. Havana's geographical location makes it a strategic point of convergence, not only because of its proximity to the capital, but also because of its access to important maritime routes. INOTU (2024).

The province's territory is characterised by a combination of plains and highlands, especially in the flat region of Havana-Matanzas, which favours both agriculture and human settlement. The coastline north of Havana is remarkably beautiful and offers beaches that attract both locals and tourists, making it one of the country's main tourist centres. The natural wealth is complemented by the bay of Havana, which is not only a relevant geographical element, but also of great historical and cultural importance.

Havana has a constantly developing hotel network that responds to the growing demand of national and international tourism. The city's historical and cultural heritage is one of its main attractions, with places of special relevance such as the historic centre of Old Havana, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Aguilar, J. L. R. (2024). This architectural legacy includes a wide variety of buildings that reflect the cultural diversity of the city. In addition to its historical value, the province has numerous recreational and cultural areas. Suburban parks such as the National Zoo, the Botanical Garden and Lenin Park offer spaces for recreation and environmental education. In the cultural sphere, Havana has a rich offer of museums, art galleries, theatres, restaurants and cabarets, which enrich the visitor's experience and boost the local economy.

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Hotel infrastructure in the province of Havana

The province's hotel infrastructure has undergone a remarkable development, which is attributed to various causes, one of the most significant being the growing tourist demand. In response to this demand, the city has experienced a considerable increase in the supply of accommodation, with more than 81,000 hotel rooms currently available. This growth is reflected not only in the total number of rooms, but also in the quality and diversity of hotel establishments.

Since 2022, Havana has opened eight new hotels and at least five more are expected to open in the near future. This expansion clearly indicates the intention of the authorities and entrepreneurs to attract more visitors and to position the city as a key tourist destination in the Caribbean. In this context, it is important to note that approximately 60% of the hotel facilities are managed by foreign chains, which is evidence of the internationalisation of the sector and the confidence it generates among foreign investors.

At present, eighteen managements operate under one hundred and thirteen contracts, including joint ventures that control around five thousand rooms. The categorisation of Havana's hotels leans towards quality, with 65% of the available accommodation in the four- and five-star categories. This orientation reflects the desire to raise standards of service and comfort, in line with the expectations of modern tourists, who are looking for unforgettable experiences. The new investments are aimed at adding luxury and upper-middle class hotels, which broadens the range of options for different market segments, Figure 1

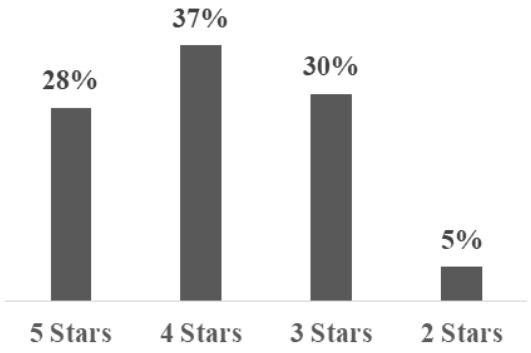


Figure 1 Tourist accommodation establishments in Havana
Source: elaborated based on ONEI (2024).

Main facilities for the holding of events and meetings

Havana, the capital of Cuba, stands out not only for its rich history and cultural heritage, but also as an important venue for events and meetings. The available facilities vary in size and characteristics, adapting to different types of activities, from large-scale conferences to meetings with fewer participant'sOther relevant options are: The Hotel Nacional de Cuba, representative both for its architecture and its history, the Hotel Tryp Habana Libre stands out as one of the main exponents for the celebration of events in Havana, which has hosted important meetings of international organisations and heads of state.



The Palace de las Conventions of Havana occupies an area of 60,000 square metres and has 12 air-conditioned halls of different formats, multi-purpose rooms and offices, which guarantee excellent working conditions.

Other relevant options are: The Hotel Nacional de Cuba, representative both for its architecture and its history, the Hotel Tryp Habana Libre stands out as one of the main exponents for the celebration of events in Havana, which has hosted important meetings of international organisations and heads of state.

Tourism behaviour in the province of Havana.

Since the 16th century, merchants and seafarers have been completing the urban personality and the city context of the town of San Cristóbal de La Habana. The 1950s saw the consolidation of tourism in the capital, with an accelerated process of hotel construction. This period also saw an increase in nightlife venues, such as cabarets and gambling casinos, most of which were operated by the mafia or the so-called 'organised crime syndicate' from the United States (Figueras, 2005). In the late 1980s, tourism in Cuba began to develop significantly and became one of the main sources of income and employment for the nation. This process intensified from 1990 onwards

In 1996, international tourism to Cuba exceeded one million visitors for the first time, consolidating the island as an attractive destination in the Caribbean. Since then, the number of tourists has only increased, leading to the creation of new hotel infrastructure and associated services, and the generation of employment. In 2019, the tourism sector generated approximately 114 122 jobs, reflecting the importance of tourism as a driver of economic and social development. However, despite these advances, tourism in Cuba continues to face significant challenges, such as the need to improve the quality of services, adapt to new market trends and cope with the economic restrictions imposed by the US embargo. Likewise, the sustainability of tourism is a crucial issue, given the environmental and social impact it can generate in a country where the cultural and natural heritage is invaluable.

The fundamental source of the data presented is the National Statistics System, through which ONEI, with its territorial and municipal offices, captures information directly from the centres. We would like to acknowledge the work of ONEI and other bodies and institutions that have collaborated by providing important data.

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Analysis of the behaviour of tourism in the province of Havana: main economic indicators.

The flow of international tourists, the income generated by tourism and the average annual occupancy rate are fundamental indicators for evaluating the performance of the sector. These elements not only reflect the economic management of tourism, but also make it possible to forecast its future development. In the context of Havana, tourist arrivals have experienced significant variations over the years. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cuban capital experienced a tourism boom, resulting in 87 972 direct jobs in the sector. In addition, an estimated 149 552 other indirect jobs in related sectors, such as food, transport and handicrafts, depended on this tourism activity. Figure 2

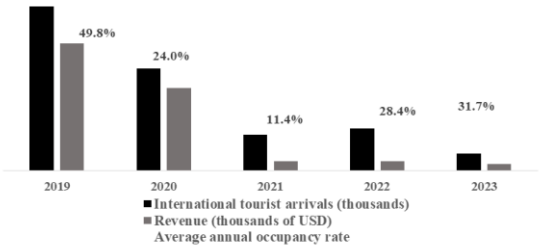


Figure 2: Main indicators of tourism in Havana Province.
Source: elaborated based on ONEI (2024).

Analysis of the MICE tourism market in Latin America.

According to ICCA's 2019 statistics, 1481 international events were held in Latin America during 2017-2019, representing a CAGR of 2.93%. According to the Mordor Intelligence report (2024), the MICE tourism market size in Latin America is estimated to be USD 110 million in 2025 and is expected to reach USD 152 billion by 2030, at an annual growth rate of 6.7 % during the period 2025-2030.

The impact of COVID-19 on MICE tourism: The COVID-19 pandemic has generated profound changes in multiple economic sectors globally, with tourism being one of the most affected. In this context, meetings and events tourism has faced unprecedented challenges. Recent studies indicate that, in 2020, meeting tourism in Latin America experienced a reduction of up to 80% compared to previous years, leading to a considerable decline in economic activity related to the tourism sector. Rodríguez, J. L. R. y Chávez, E. S. (2021); Litvinova-Kulikova, L. (2023).Cities that depended heavily on this type of tourism, such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires and São Paulo, saw their local economies particularly affected. Sirkis, G., R. et al (2022). Zazueta-Hernández, M. G., and Velarde-Valdez, M. (2024).Table 1

Table 1 Evolution of international meetings in Latin America e 2017-2023

Events (ICCA) (annual %)					Change		
2017	2018	2019	2023	2017/2016	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2023
1358	1393	1481	902	2.6%	3.4%	6.1%	-59.1%

Source: elaborated from ICCA figures (2024).)

The analysis of the MICE tourism market in Latin America, prepared by Mordor Intelligence (2024), covers the growth and analysis of the travel and tourism industry in the Americas. According to the report, the MICE tourism market size in Latin America is estimated to be USD 110 million in 2025 and is expected to reach USD 152 billion by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 6.7% during the period (2025-2030).

Meetings and events tourism in Latin America represents a strategic area with great potential to boost economic development and cultural integration in the region. Despite its benefits, it is important to note that these events are unevenly concentrated in the region. According to recent data, approximately 63% of events take place in Mercosur member countries, which shows a disparity in the geographical distribution of meeting tourism. While some nations, such as Brazil, Argentina and Colombia, achieve a steady flow of events, other Latin American countries with great potential to host this type of activities remain under-utilised. Table

Table.2 Meetings and Events Tourism in the main tourist destinations in Latin America (2016-2023)

Countries	2016	2019	2023	País	2016	2019	2023
Brazil	244	233	156	Ecuador	36	44	29
Argentina	188	232	145	Paraguay	29	34	16
Mexico	182	172	136	Rep., Dominicana	25	37	24
Colombia	147	154	103	Guatemala	25	21	16
Chile	104	109	77	Cuba	23	14	5
Perú	98	87	44	Puerto Rico	17	112	14
Uruguay	69	59	44	Bolivia	16	34	13
Panamá	45	49	33	Honduras	7	8	4
Costa Rica	43	45	31	Jamaica	7	7	4

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Ecuador	36	44	29	Nicaragua	6	5	4
Paraguay	29	34	16	Otros	36	25	4

Source: elaborated from ICCA figures (2024).)

The lack of adequate infrastructure, political and economic instability, as well as the perception of risk, are factors that limit the capacity of some countries to attract international events. In turn, this perpetuates a dynamic of inequality that could be reversed through public policies aimed at diversifying the region's tourism offer. Strategies such as improving transport and accommodation infrastructure, promoting lesser-known destinations and encouraging public-private partnerships are essential to achieve a more equitable distribution of events.

Perception of the potential of MICE tourism in the city of Havana.

In order to understand the perception of the potential of this type of tourism in the Cuban capital, several tools and techniques have been implemented to systematically collect and analyse relevant information. First, a comprehensive market analysis was carried out. This technique provides an overview of the competitive landscape in which MICE tourism operates in Havana. Aspects such as market size, expected growth rates and the main players involved in this sector were assessed. Through this assessment, current trends and development opportunities were identified, as well as potential threats that could affect the growth of MICE tourism in the city. In parallel, surveys and focus groups were used as qualitative and quantitative research methods. These tools enabled the assessment of the perceptions of a representative group of stakeholders in the sector, including event organisers, hotel entrepreneurs and regular participants of conferences and conventions. Through structured questionnaires, quantitative data were collected to provide statistical insight into the acceptance and expectations of MICE tourism in Havana.

In addition, focus groups facilitated access to in-depth qualitative data, which allowed for an understanding of the motivations, concerns and satisfaction levels of the different actors in the sector. This mixed approach not only provided a more complete picture of the market perception, but also helped to identify specific areas to improve and strengthen MICE tourism in the city. Table

Table 3 Importance of key issues recommended for inclusion in interviews and surveys.

Recommended key issues (Focus Groups)	Mean	Standard deviation
Importance of tourism-related services in strengthening the MICE segment..	**4.35**	**0.497**
Catering, Accommodation, Signage, Accessibility, Connectivity, Preparation of service personnel, Transport		
Strategies to be implemented to contribute to the growth of MICE tourism in Havana	**4.46**	**0.487**
Expand the tourist offer, Improve infrastructure, Plan and organise events and conventions, Greater publicity and dissemination of events, Improve international accessibility, Improve local accessibility		
Who should work on the planning and execution of strategies to support the reactivation of MICE tourism in Cuba	**4.85**	**0.349**
National Authorities (Ministry of Tourism) Public Administrations Travel Agencies Event Organisers, Tourist Establishments Professionals Specialised in MICE, Higher Education Institutions and R&D&I Centres		

Source: based on Focus Group experts.

Analysis of MICE tourism in the current context: the importance of fundamental aspects.

As part of the research on MICE tourism in the province of Havana, a series of interviews and surveys were carried out with tourism management professionals and managers in the province. This process is fundamental for a better understanding of the current dynamics of this sector and its relevance within the tourism panorama as a whole. The key aspects selected for the study of MICE tourism include a variety of factors ranging from infrastructure to public policies, market trends and visitor profile.

In this sense, the interviews have allowed not only to capture the perspective of public and private managers, but also the opinion of experts in catering, tourism operations and transport. In this way, the aim is to obtain a comprehensive vision that takes into account the multiple dimensions of the tourism segment. In addition, the analysis of the responses allows us to identify relationships between different variables, such as customer satisfaction, service quality and operational efficiency. The interviews have highlighted the importance of continuous training of staff involved in MICE tourism, which impacts on the overall visitor experience and the reputation of the destination.

Table 4 Análisis del turismo MICE* en el contexto actual: la importancia de los aspectosfundamentales.

		Mean	Standard deviation
1	Which option do the current conditions of MICE tourism	2.93	0.57

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	in Cuba correspond to?		
3	Do you consider that the city of Havana is prepared to compete in the MICE tourism market?	3.21	0.83
4	What qualification do you give to the services linked to MICE tourism management?	3.29	0.93
5	Do you know of the implementation of strategies to strengthen MICE tourism in the city of Havana?	3.14	0.717
6	Is there a congruence of strategies with the objective of achieving the growth of MICE tourism?	3.07	0.573

*Reliability statistics: Calculate the reliability of a questionnaire or scale using SPSS: Cronbach's alpha coefficient, based on standardised items (.892).

Conclusions

Havana, the capital of Cuba, has established itself as one of the most important tourist destinations in the Caribbean, currently attracting more than half of all foreign visitors to the island. This phenomenon is largely due to the city's rich cultural, historical and natural offerings, as well as its safe environment and diverse hotel facilities. However, despite these attractions, the event, meeting and convention tourism sector has not developed as much as expected in comparison to international trends.

Despite these advantages, event tourism in Havana faces several challenges. Firstly, international competition, as other destinations have been able to position themselves as leaders in this segment thanks to aggressive marketing strategies and a better adaptation to the needs of the market. Also, lack of promotion and limited understanding of the dynamics of business tourism in the region prevent Havana from making the most of its potential.

In addition, government policies related to tourism need to align more effectively with global trends and promote integrated packages that attract event organisers. Significant progress could also be made in improving the training of event management professionals and in creating strategic alliances with international organisations

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