Introduction

Costa Rica is a country which is home to a little over 4 million people. It houses and preserves 5% of the world’s biodiversity with its cloud and rain forests, national parks, wildlife refuges and private reserves. It is one of the world’s most complex and rich ecosystems and in an article by anthropologist Tim Wallace has been called the “poster child for ecotourism”.\(^1\) With its white, sand beaches and popular destinations such as San José, Tortuguero, La Fortuna, and Monteverde, Costa Rica offers everything from scuba diving to volcano hiking and all that is in between. Guatemala houses over 13 million people. Its people are the only people in Central America recognized as Mayans and even then, only about 60% of them make that claim. From the ruins of Tikal to those of Iximché, from scuba diving in Panajachel to shopping in Chichicastenango, Guatemala offers a wide variety of places to visit and things to do. Both of the countries are very similar in these aspects. So why is it that Costa Rica’s tourism industry, if you will allow the expression, is booming while the tourism industry of Guatemala is almost non-existent? It is this question that has made me decide to do a problem-solving study. I find it very disconcerting that, despite its very diverse culture and history as well as its amazing ecology, that Costa Rica is better portrayed by the tourism media when its attractions are almost identical to those of Guatemala. Why is this?

Posing the Question

My research is mainly centered on the average American’s viewpoint of what a vacation should consist of and how the tourism media (namely guide books, internet, and travel agencies) are created in order to appeal to the average American’s vacation ideals. When I was first presented with this issue, I was unsure of where to start. Looking for some sort of inspiration, I went to the internet. I started by reading a little on the history of each country.\(^2\) When I felt that I had what could pass as an amateur’s knowledge of the history of both counties, I decided that my next step would be to turn to the ever popular guide books. I had assumed that I would find both countries portrayed similarly. Having lived with a Guatemalan family for four weeks and explored some of the more touristy sites in and around Lake Atitlán, I already had what I thought was a good view on the tourist industry there. I have never, however, been to Costa Rica and knew very little of its tourist industry and its attractions. What I found, however, was a world of bias and mixed signals. In the end, I was posed with one question: Do we really choose our vacation destinations or is it the tourism media that chooses for us?
Costa Rica is located in Central America and sits in between Nicaragua and Panama. It is home to more than 4 million people, most of whom are indigenous. Its primary languages are Spanish and English. As previously stated, it is home to 5% of the world’s identified living species. For tourists, Costa Rica is considered nothing short of paradise. Its top destinations are San José, Monteverde, Tortuguero, and La Fortuna. These four destinations offer many exciting possibilities for tourists. For example, San José, located in the central region of Costa Rica, offers a vast array of activities. One can view the mile wide crater of the Poás Volcano which has been dormant since 1991. The Plaza de la Cultura, Central Park, National Theatre and the National Museum also serve as popular tourist attractions. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is another worth-while attraction. Located in the Midwest region of Costa Rica, Monteverde is a popular destination for those interested in nature as it offers everything from exotic animals to hummingbirds. Perhaps the most well-known attraction of Costa Rica is its Rainforest Aerial Tram. The Aerial Tram is designed to safely give tourists a view of the Costa Rican rainforest. Located on the eastern coast, Tortuguero is another popular destination. It is home to the Green Turtle Research Station. Here, tourists can learn about efforts to protect the turtle’s habitat and their young. Here, the beaches are stunning with their white sands and blue waters. A cruise through the canals allows tourists to see the howler and white-faced monkeys. The Caño Palma wildlife is also a popular site in Tortuguero. La Fortuna is yet another
popular destination. Here, tourists can see the famous Arenal Volcano and take a canopy hike for a beautiful view of the rainforest and its many residents.

Guatemala is also located in Central America. It sits on the Pacific Coast and is surrounded by El Salvador and Honduras to the south, Belize to the east and Mexico to the north. This country is best known for its Mayan heritage and history. Here, Spanish is spoken by nearly everyone, although there are 26 indigenous languages as well! When visiting Guatemala, the most popular sites to see are in Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Lake Atitlán, Tikal, and Antigua. The Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City allows tourists to see the intricately hand-woven textiles and costumes that have been made by the indigenous peoples. The National Palace, the Cathedral, the National Library Parque la Aurora, which contains the zoo, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology are also popular attractions. Chichicastenango is another popular destination. Here, tourists can visit the local market which has been operating for more than one thousand years. This market is home to some of the largest trajes and tipicas. Santo Tomás Church is another magnificent place to visit. In this church, the past and present come together to perform a ceremony like no other. Here, Mayan culture and the Catholic religion mix and the priests perform the service in the ancient dialects. Here, “…copal incense fills the air, and rose petals and candles cover the church floor.” Lake Atitlán is a 900
foot deep lake surrounded by three volcanoes. Santiago is perhaps the most visited city by tourists in Lake Atitlán. Santiago is probably the most visited city in Lake Atitlán. People come from all over the world to visit the church and to make an offer to Maximón, the local idol. Tikal, also known as the city of voices, is the most well-known city in Guatemala. Tikal was first developed around 800 B.C. and has now become a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mayan ruins tower over the scenic landscape of this city. Here one can visit the Temple of the Grand Jaguar, Temple II, Plaza of the Seven Suns and El Mundo Perdido. Tikal National Park is a part of the Mayan Biosphere Reserve and is home to many different wildlife species, including tropical birds, red coates, howler monkeys reptiles and more. Antigua is another very popular destination. Antigua was the countries capital for more than 200 years but was moved when the city was nearly destroyed by an earthquake in 1773. La Merced Church and Las Capuchinas Convent are two must-sees in this city. If fishing is what you desire, then San José is the city for you. Red Snapper, tarpon, bass and sailfish are just some of the fish that reside in these waters. Tourists can also book a lancha to take them from Iztapa through the Chiquimulilla Canal. The Chiquimulilla Canal is a part of the Monterrico Nature Reserve which protects wildlife such as the green iguana, marine turtles and Crocodiles.

**Method 1: Interviewing**

As I slowly sorted through the information that I was being presented with, I realized that I was not coming any closer to discovering why the tourism media is portraying Costa Rica as the better vacation destination. I sat back from the computer, momentarily lost in thought. I had the radio playing in the background, as I often do when I am working. The sun was shining through my open window and the breeze that accompanied it made me long to be anywhere but at my desk. I closed my eyes in frustration and propped my head in my hands. I was trying to figure out where else I should go for information when my mind started to wander, as it often does, and I found myself listening to the radio. There was an ad playing for Wyndham travel resorts. They were hiring, but this is not what interested me. I played the ad again in my head. Travel Agencies, who better to ask than the people who are the heart of America’s travel industry?

I started with the Yellow Pages. I pulled out the five pound yellow and grey book form my bookshelf and carefully eagerly began to search for travel agencies. Surprisingly, there are only ten in my area. I decided to start at the top and work my way down. Now my only problem was deciding on what questions to ask. I knew that I had to be careful and not lead my interviewee. Interviewing is, in some ways, an art and I will probably never master it. I started to write, thinking about questions which would give me the maximum results with the least amount of hassle. After deciding on a simple outline of 20 questions (I could only wish that it were the hand-held game!), I started calling travel agencies to set up appointments. My first two calls were unsuccessful. One agency had gone out-of-business while another was booked with appointments until the 7th of July.

On the third try, a man with a deep voice accented by a southern drawl picked up the phone. He sounded older and very jovial. When he told me his name, I realized that he was the owner of the agency. I could tell this because his name was under the heading of “owner” on the ad in the Yellow Pages. I explained to him that I was a student researching tourism and that I was interested in the way that the tourism media portrayed Guatemala and Costa Rica, despite the many things that they have in common. He
said that he didn’t have much time for a formal interview, but, if I was willing, he had ten minutes with which he could talk to me. I agreed and was about to ask when I should come in when he began to talk about Costa Rica. Apparently, I was going to do an interview by phone. I did not like this much, as I cannot see someone’s facial expressions and, to me, a phone interview seems much less personal. I feel that phone interviews are inadequate because there is a lack of commitment and it feels very rushed. Also, the interviewee may be doing something else on the other end of the line, become distracted and may unintentionally give the wrong information about the topic which is being discussed. This is how I felt when talking to Mr. Rowen.

From the time Mr. Rowen answered the phone until he ended our interview, we were constantly interrupted and he skirted around several questions, often losing his train of thought after talking to those who were around him. I was only to ask two questions: Why was the tourism media portraying Costa Rica as the better vacation destination and which did he recommend to families looking to vacation abroad. The answer to the first question took me off guard. After telling me three times that he had been to Costa Rica (of which he reminded me two more times throughout the interview), he said that the “People were friendly, very knowledgeable and ecologically aware. They are able to point out and find native fauna and flora.” His voice held an air of excitement and he started speaking faster. His words became a blur and I was unable to concentrate on his tone of voice and the meaning behind his words. This is another reason why person-to-person interviews are preferable to telephone interviews. Most household phones do not have built-in recorders and, as in my case, there was too much background noise on Mr. Rowen’s end for me to use my digital recorder. So, I typed as I listened, sometimes typing whole sentences but mostly just jotting down key phrases. He told me about the various animals that were in the nature reserves. More than once he brings up the camouflaged hooded lizards, howler monkeys, exotic birds and “bright colors of the flowers” which were “absolutely stunning”. I was also told that anyone with an interest in ecology should spend some time in Costa Rica as its people are very “ecologically aware” and they have various volunteer programs associated with their ecological interests. Seeing an opportunity, I interrupted and asked about Guatemala and its tourist industry. I made a brief comparison of Guatemala’s nature reserves and their interests in ecology. “Well, I have never been to Guatemala, but it seems like it is the same type of country,” was his reply. His tone was very begrudging, as if he was admitting something that he did not like. He said that they are well known for their Mayan ruins and their archaeological sites, but, again, that he had never been there. I took the opportunity in his brief silence to ask which he would recommend to visitors looking to travel to either country. The answer: Costa Rica. According to Mr. Rowen, Costa Rica has more of a “tourist structure”. They offer many attractions which are appealing to Americans, such as golfing, diving, and all-inclusive hotels and resorts which visitors, through the travel agency, can book and pay for all at once. When suggesting a vacation, he caters to the needs of the customer. For him, it is essential to factor in “American needs”. He said that hotel chains, resorts, comfort and interests all played a part in selling a vacation. He excused himself from our interview a few minutes later, saying he had an appointment with a client. He apologized for his lack of information on Guatemala and proceeded to tell me that if I had any more questions I could call him.

I sat and digested this new information. To him, Costa Rica was the equivalent of paradise. Guatemala was only mentioned in what seemed like an after thought. He had said that they cater to “American needs”.

What did he mean by this? Is there some list of needs that, as an American, I need to read in order to see how I should choose my vacation destination? Was this a list that had been handed down from generation to generation, starting with our forefathers and continuing down the line? Had it, like the Declaration of Independence, been framed and put on display for all to see? I realized that I was starting to sound cynical, but I could not stop myself. Remembering how his jovial voice had turned almost sour when he mentioned Guatemala only served to agitate me more. How could he be judgmental when he had “never been there” and he clearly knew very little about Guatemala? The most obvious of my questions was why, as a travel agent, would he not try to find information about Guatemala instead of dismissing it completely as a possible tourist destination? Armed with this new information, I re-wrote my interview questions, now including the question of “Do you factor in American needs and why are they so important?”

Unfortunately, I was able to schedule only two more interviews. I left messages with two agencies for a call back, which they never did. One agency was closed and two more had agents on vacation and politely explained that they could not help me. This agitated me as well. Why would you send all of your agents on vacation at the same time? Thankfully, one of the two interviews that I was able to schedule provided me with more information.

I was more prepared for my second interview, well, would have been if it had been a telephone interview. I had switched from my home phone to my cell, which has a built-in recorder. I also had a pen and paper in hand, as I am much faster at writing than I am at typing. The voice that greeted me was a woman’s. She listened attentively as I explained why I had called, saying “oh” and “ok” whenever I took a breath. She said that she did not know much about either, but that one of her partners sold packages to South and Central America and that I should talk to him. The next person to answer the phone was definitely male. He had a deep voice which made me think that he was older and very tall. He said that he would be happy to help and we scheduled an appointment for the next day. The third interview I scheduled with a woman. She sounded very young and slightly nervous, almost like she was not sure if she should agree to the interview, but she did in the end. As I thought about what could be the reason behind her nervousness, my mind wandered yet again back to the phrase “American needs”. I did not know why this bothered my so much. What were “American needs”?

I woke up on the morning of my scheduled interview, and ran over the questions again as I quickly drove to my interview site. It was hot again today, with temperatures already in the 80s even though it was only 10:00 in the morning. I checked to make sure that I had not forgotten my recorder in the midst of the chaotic morning. Thankfully my faithful companion was sitting there in the passenger’s seat. Traffic was light, as usual. The breeze felt nice as it drifted through my window. I pulled into a small shopping center. There were eight shops in all and all were in identical buildings. The grey and black tiles that covered the buildings made them look unimportant. I grabbed my recorder, shut my door and then made my way through the third door. The first thing I noticed was that the office smelled of pineapples. The radio was softly playing a song that I recognized. I started singing along in my head. I closed the door as silently as I had opened it. The room opened up to my left rather than in front of me. The desk to my left was cluttered with plastic organizers, photos, and manila folders. An LCD screen boasted the logo Dell on the back of its sleek black cover. A woman was sitting behind it, typing furiously. She looked up and gave me a smile, which I
happily returned. She had a medium build and looked to be shorter than I was, although she never stood while I was there. Her dirty blond hair matched her brown eyes. She wore a pink long-sleeve shirt and khakis, looking professional and comfortable despite the heat which lingered outside. The desk next to her, on her left my right, was occupied by a man. He stood as I walked in and I was instantly reminded of the old 50s and 60s movies where all of the gentlemen stood whenever a lady entered the room. He walked over and shook my hand, introducing himself as Burt as he did so. His voice was very deep and he stood several inches taller than I did. My head only came to the top of his shoulders. I sat across from him. His desk was much less cluttered than his partner’s. It only held a phone and some files which were neatly stacked to one side. His computer sat on a desk behind him. It was the same LCD screen as his companion’s. This desk held pictures of his family on their vacations. I sat across from him and asked if he would mind if I recorded our conversation. He gladly complied and the interview started.

I opened the interview by asking which country he recommends more to potential tourists: Guatemala or Costa Rica. He smiled slightly at the question and I had the strange feeling that he had been prepared for this. He answered that:

“Choosing between Costa Rica and Guatemala would depend upon the type of adventure you are looking for. If you are more into the Indian history, the Mayan history, and stuff like that, then you would lean more toward the Guatemalan side. If you are looking for something more developed, more Americanized, then you would choose Costa Rica. There are some nice beaches in Guatemala. But they are very underdeveloped versus the resorts and the infusion of American money in Costa Rica. You have a lot of American Citizens retiring in Costa Rica. Several years ago to purchase land really cheap and a lot of people were moving down there. So with that, you have the chance for more development and nicer stretches of beaches. You don’t have the history that Guatemala has, such as civil unrest, so that’s the big plus. If you want outdoor adventure, you have river rafting, the volcano tours, rainforests and stuff like that in Costa Rica that has been developed where you don’t have that in Guatemala. The other Central American countries have the potential for that, but it just hasn’t been developed yet because of their uncivil history. So, that would depend on the individual what we would suggest, but I can tell you that we have a whole lot more people go to Costa Rica than Guatemala.”

I thought this very interesting. Parts of Guatemala can be considered, by our standards, to be very underdeveloped. When we, my fellow students and I, stayed in Guatemala City our first night, it reminded me of the outskirts of Paris. The traffic was horrible. Everything was so busy. People were coming and going. Horns were blaring. Instead of crosswalks, there are skywalks. These are walkways which sit above the street. This is the safest and, possibly, the only way to cross from one side of the street to the other. They have a four story mall. It has no main frame and is covered by what appears to be a tightly stretched tan tarp. The stores inside resemble the stores of every mall in America. The hotel was very nice and just as cozy as any hotel that we had stayed in. It had clean rooms and bathrooms and even provided the water for us to brush our teeth in and drink. Panajachel, a city located in the northeast region of Lake Atitlán, is much the same. Here the atmosphere is charged with the intent to sell. Locals from the surrounding towns travel miles every morning, carrying their wares to Santander Street to sell. Santander Street is always busy with
tourists coming and going, tuk-tuks (one of the local methods of transportation) racing up and down the street looking for passengers, and locals inviting tourists into their stores. The men who run the shops are dressed in non-traditional clothing. They wear jeans and t-shirts or button-up shirts instead of trajes. The women, however, choose to wear trajes, thus exposing the locals to a little of their culture. The trajes are full of color and often attract attention of those who have just arrived to Panajachel. Many of the tourists are interested in buying a huipil or headscarf. There are many women carry their wares up and down Santander Street. Their wares are mostly made of hand-made items, such as beaded works (Mostacilla) and head-scarves. This street is always busy. Just two streets over is La Reserva Natural. With its beautiful canopy walk, breath-taking waterfall, enthusiastic spider monkeys, and Mariposarium (butterfly reserve), this reserve is a wonderful testament to the biodiversity and ecological awareness of Guatemala. The muelle is easily accessible and have lanchas that will take tourists to and city around Lake Atitlán. These lanchas, similar to low-sitting speed boats, can hold anywhere from 1-30 people. Afraid of getting wet? No problem. Each boat has plastic tarps that can be drawn at will down over the windows. Panajachel also offers scuba diving for those who are interested, and at any time tourists can book a tour of the surrounding areas or procure a guide who will take them hiking through the many wilderness trails or volcanoes that dot the area. It would seem that, just in this small city alone, that there is plenty to both do and see. Why is it, then, that I seem to be back to my original question: Why do the tourism media promote tourism in Costa Rica and not in Guatemala?

I went back to the interview that I had conducted with Burt. I was still bothered by the “American needs” concept. So I asked, “Which country would you recommend for a family of four with children who are at least ten years of age?” Although the answer did not provide me with the information which I sought, it did provide me with a new angle. Without hesitating, Burt replied that Costa Rica would be the best choice.

“Most of the interest we have in Guatemala is for mission trips. We have very few [tourists] going to Guatemala, and I can’t really remember the last time we had someone who wasn’t going for tourist reasons. We don’t have anyone go for vacation. That just doesn’t happen. Maybe in the future it will. Now, we do have school groups go for historical reasons, for the ancient Mayan sites. But, other than that, vacation between the two it’s always Costa Rica.”

So know I was faced with another dilemma. Why is it that people do not vacation there? Why is it that only student groups and missionaries visit Guatemala when it offers the same attractions as Costa Rica? Which would you choose and what would you choose and on what would you base your decision? This is the next question I ask. Again, his answer only causes me to have more questions.

“Well, both of those, if they are nature lovers, if that’s what they’re going for. I don’t think it’s promoted as much as Costa Rica. If they used as much money promoting what they [Guatemala] have to offer versus what Costa Rica uses to promote, I could see the development going. Those two areas you mentioned [Lake Atitlán and Antigua] are pretty much it as far as tourist development goes. Costa Rica has the pacific coast development, Caribbean side development, [and the] San Jose side development in the middle. So you have access to everything. In Guatemala you have areas cut off and you can’t get there or you have some beautiful areas that you can get to but you have to camp out. So that doesn’t appeal to a lot of people especially with
families. I could see the development in the future if they promote it like that, but I think a lot of it has to do with their past. There are so many hindrances there. And you have that in Honduras too. In Roatan, you have a huge dive destination, but you don’t go inland. Most people go there just for that. It’s the fear factor.”

The fear factor? Ah, yes. Well, in a recent article published by Lisa Wynn we can see that the fear factor is having a positive, and not a negative, effect on tourists. According to Wynn, tourists are taking an “...elusive quest for the untouristed, the authentic and the indigenous.” Florence A. Babb also writes that “At a time when jaded tourists are becoming less fearful of the threat of terrorism and are seeking ‘a new thrill’, they may venture to new destinations.” If, as these anthropologists suggest, that tourists are seeking a more authentic, exciting, “untouristed” experience, then why is it that the “fear factor” plays such a forceful, negative role in the tourism media? Why not capitalize on a recovering country’s ecology, national parks, history and wildlife? Why not promote these things instead of merely suggesting that one should go elsewhere because of a possible threat to safety?

Tourism is not promoted as much? I sit and think about this statement. Whose fault is it that Guatemalan tourism is not being promoted? Is it the country’s and their tourism board (INGUAT), or is it the tourism media in countries such as the United States which has failed to see the possibilities surrounding tourism in places which have recently survived a revolution or civil war. For example, Guatemala is a beautiful country and its natural landmarks are visited by hundreds on a daily basis. There are several hotels that cater to tourist clientele and even offer a tour service or offer to book a tour. Most tours leave in the early morning and come back later that evening. For those tourists who wish to stay a couple of days in a designated spot, they can book a hotel there for a couple of nights and also book a tour guide. All of the Nature Reserves and historic landmarks are easily accessible and those who do choose to camp are often backpackers. I do not agree with his idea of hard-to-reach places and a camper’s environment; however, I had considered the possibility of political instability but had never really considered the country’s developmental issues.

In order to understand the issue of poverty and the “fear factor”, it is necessary to understand what happened. Recently, a civil war ravaged the country of Guatemala. Started by the guerrillas in 1980, it was a war that claimed many innocent lives and destroyed the trust between the townspeople and the law enforcement in their individual towns. It was a time of absolute terror, where talking about someone unfavorably or even agreeing with someone’s opinion of the government could mean death if overheard by the wrong person. Many were killed for personal gain, while others were killed for revenge. The war began in 1960 with the attempted overthrow of Gen. Ydigoras Fuentes. When the persons involved in the coup failed, they went into hiding and began to develop ties with Cuba. For the next 36 years, this group, as well as countless other guerrilla groups, murdered and tortured ambassadors, military generals and innocent townspeople. It was not until 1996, after two years of negotiating, that the Peace Accords were signed. Perhaps the two most significant parts of these agreements, both of which apply directly to the main topic of the report, are as follows:

“The advent of peace has opened the way for progress. Documented human rights violations have declined significantly in recent years, and institutions are being built to ensure fair and equal
treatment for all Guatemalans. A new civilian police force is learning to serve the people and not instill fear. The President’s Human Rights Commission and the office of the Human Rights Ombudsman are also now in place and have an important role to play. The new Supreme Court has made clear its intention to address shortcomings. The international community, multilaterally and bilaterally, is a committed ally in these efforts.

The 1996 signing of the peace accords, which ended 36 years of civil war, removed a major obstacle to foreign investment, but numerous corruption scandals associated with the Portillo administration have dampened investor confidence. The distribution of income remains highly unequal, with perhaps 75% of the population below the poverty line. Ongoing challenges include increasing the government revenues, negotiating further assistance from international donors, upgrading both government and private financial operations, and narrowing the trade deficit.8

These two sections help to explain the “developmental issues”. With the documentation of Human Rights now in place and the concern with foreign investment, Guatemala seems to be on the road to recovery. According to several books and government websites, the Civil War can be blamed for the current lack of tourism in Guatemala. The answer to this question may be found in an article by Babb. Her article focuses on a key question: Can tourism and revolution intersect? Can a country use the images of its civil war or revolution in such a way as to promote tourism? She writes:

“There remains a need to consider the ways that tourism and revolution intersect, particularly at a time when postsocialism is heralded and globalized capitalism reigns. Some writers have recently discussed the desires of tourists to discover what is new, unusual, and sometimes dangerous or disastrous (Rojek 1997), but little attention has been devoted to the ways that revolutionary or postrevolutionary societies have sought to strengthen economic development and national identity through the promotion of tourism.” 9

Here we can see that there is not yet enough evidence to determine how societies which have recently survived a revolution or civil war strengthen their economic development through the tourist industry. With this in mind, how can we expect a country with an underdeveloped economy to promote tourism?

As the interview with Burt continued, I began to wonder why the tourism media was doing virtually nothing to help Guatemala bounce back from its current state of “poverty”. Burt became pensive when I asked this question. He excused himself, saying that he would go and bring me brochures in order to demonstrate how Costa Rica is promoted versus how Guatemala is promoted. He returned several minutes later accompanied by an armful of brochures. He sat each in front of me, walking me through them as he would a potential client. What I saw absolutely astounded me. There were four vacation books, each ranging from 10-20 pages. All included breath-taking pictures of the Cloud Forest, the Rain Forest, Howler monkeys, beautiful white beaches, and amazing hotels. There were six books in total. One was a Central and South American vacation guide, but it did not mention Guatemala at all. The other, the same vacation guide but published by a different company, listed Guatemala as an extension. It was when he showed this to me that he began to explain,

“Just to give you an idea on Costa Rica and how the area is promoted...You have a lot of tour packages for Costa Rica, for Panama. Guatemala is pretty much...well, let me show you. You have
it as an extension. You go to Antigua, Tikal, Guatemala City and that’s pretty much all you’ll see. [It is only for] 4-5 days. [With] Costa Rica you have in-depth 10 day or longer tours. It’s promoted much heavier than Guatemala. Guatemala...is promoted more as a pre or post tour. You can go and see the highlights where as you are going to get more in-depth because it [tourism and the country] is more developed in Costa Rica. Not to say that there is anything to see in Guatemala. It is the same as Nicaragua. It’s an extension. Even on a Central American tour it is going to primarily hit Costa Rica and Panama, everything else is gone unless you add on to it. That is what we find in a lot of the tour programs. You know, you have much nicer hotel developments in those two countries than in Nicaragua or Guatemala. You have this due to a past history that no one wanted to invest in because of the fear factor...

As I sat and looked at the brochures, I realized that he was right. The tourism media has made Costa Rica into a modern day paradise. The only things that they recommend as far as Guatemala is concerned are the Mayan ruins and Semana Santa, a Holy Week celebrated by all in Guatemala. I thanked him for his point of view and for providing me with further information on how the tourism media portrays both countries. I only had one more interview to conduct and I still had not discovered what “American needs” meant.

My final interview was conducted with the owner of the agency. The young woman, the one to whom I had spoken, had called to cancel the meeting, saying that one of her children was sick and had to stay home from school. I thought that talking to the owner may actually provide me with more information. I discovered that this is not always the case. By the time our interview had ended, I had more questions instead of answers. I began by asking about Costa Rica. What made it stand out? He said that they had done a “marvelous job” with promoting tourism. He said that the tourism companies had done great in establishing offices there. On the other hand, he knew nothing about Guatemala.

“Plan a tour to Guatemala? I’d have to do some searching to find a couple of programs going to Guatemala ... Costa Rica is a very pop destination. It lays over Guatemala like a dollar over a dime as far as facilities for agency to settle ... [I would] really do some research to find out who is running tours ... You don’t have the lift, the number of planes, going there as you do to Costa Rica. From the stand point of tourism, I couldn’t tell you a whole lot.”

I then asked about the mission trips to Guatemala. Were these the only people going to Guatemala?

“That’s exactly correct. The tour companies have done a very good job of doing that. I could find four or five brochures to Costa Rica and maybe one to Guatemala. So, as I can imagine, the Guatemalans have got their work cut out for them if they are going to try and capture that kind of tourism. I don’t even know what the facilities are! Costa Rica has built some very fine resorts, but I have not heard of any of the big international hotel companies moving into Guatemala building resorts. It could be a function of the government. They might want to limit investments of that nature. See those things [nature reserves, historical ruins, diving and fishing], I don’t think that the Guatemalan tours commission, or whoever it is running it, is popularizing those things like they should. When it comes down to travel agencies selling and sending people to places, they are going to send them to places they know are popular, good facilities, tour
operators that are running tours there. Travel agents make money from commissions. They have to stay in business...”

From this interview, I have found that tourist agencies only sell packages to countries with which they are familiar, have good reputations, and nice resorts. I have also found out that they are paid by commission. Does this have some influence over the places that they promote? Does this particular company not promote vacation packages to Guatemala not because of the lack of information, but simply because they believe that it is underdeveloped and that the only people interested in going are mission groups? It was not until I was driving back home, focusing not on the road, but on the past two interviews, that I finally realized what “American needs” meant. According to the interviews, Americans prefer to go places that have all of the comforts of home, namely America. They are expecting to have nice hotels with continental breakfasts, resort pools and spas, all-inclusive resorts, white beaches, blue waters, exotic drinks, etc. According to the interviewee, America’s ideal vacation must be comparable to paradise. Why is this? I started to think of who to contact in order to find the answer when, yet again, my mind started to wander. I thought of the family vacations that I have taken with my family. Whenever we take a vacation, we try to go out of the country. It occurred to me that we had stayed in an all-inclusive resort every time that we had gone to the Caribbean Islands. I sat and thought about this when I remembered going to Jamaica. My family and I decided to take a bus into town and to see what it was like outside of the resort. When they dropped us off, I remember my mother looking uncomfortable and could tell that she would rather be on the beach inside of the walls of the resort. My father and sister also looked uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as my mother. I, on the other hand, was enjoying it. It was very hot and the locals were coming and going, selling and buying produce, shoes, clothes, chickens, sugarcane, handmade works, etc. Much to the horror of my mother, I broke off from our little group and began talking and haggling with the locals. In time, she began to do so as well, enjoying the stories that they had to tell. My father and sister jumped in as I did, talking to everyone. As I pulled up to my house, I realized that asking who designed the travel packages would do no good unless I understood what factor Americans took into consideration when choosing a vacation. Would they, like my mom, prefer to forget the world outside of the resort and lay on the beach, or would they rather sit and listen to the stories which the locals had to tell and take a break from paradise? In order to find the answer to this, I designed three surveys, two which were centered on Costa Rica and Guatemala and one which centered on the factors used to determine a vacation.

Method 2: Compiling and Conducting Surveys

I took into consideration age and children when designing my first survey, as well as what methods were used when deciding on a vacation spot. I only had five questions, three meeting the above requirements and two designed specifically in order to obtain information regarding to Costa Rica and Guatemala. Figure 1 shows the survey as well as the responses in percentages. I later took question four and five and made them into an individual survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1 had 4 people circle 2 answers, and question 3 had 2 people circle 2 answers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you decide on a vacation destination?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a. Guide books
b. Internet descriptions 70%
c. Travel Agencies 10%
d. Word of Mouth 60%
e. Historical interest
f. Magazines such as Discovery and National Geographic

2. Is your decision based on the events that your children can participate in?
   a. yes 80%
   b. no 20%
   c. I have no children

3. What time of the year do you usually take your vacation?
   a. Late winter (January, February, March) 20%
   b. Spring (April, May) 20%
   c. Summer (June, July) 80%
   d. Fall (August, September, October) 20%
   e. Winter (November, December)

4. Based upon the pictures that you have seen, which country would you choose to vacation in and why?
   Costa Rica: 90% Guatemala: 10%

5. Based upon the description of each country, which would you choose and why?

Guatemala

Guatemala is a land of tropical jungles, active volcanoes, mountain lakes, mountain cloud forests, volcanic beaches and coral reefs. Weaving is a popular business with a rainbow of colors found in the villagers’ hand-woven clothes; each indigenous village has its own unique pattern and color. The ancient ruins of Tikal provide a look at Mayan culture with plazas, an acropolis, pyramids, temples and a museum. Despite its past turmoil and political instability, travelers are returning to Guatemala because it offers Central America in concentrated form: its volcanoes are the highest and most active, its Mayan ruins the most impressive, its earthquakes the most devastating and its history decidedly intense. Guatemala is the Mayan heart of Central America, though the government has touted and tortured the Maya - sticking their pictures on brochures and guns in their faces. However, indigenous culture survives in the ancient ruins of Tikal, rituals of Chichicastenango and blazing colors of Mayan dress.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica, located in Central America between Nicaragua and Panama, has plenty natural attractions and is popular with travelers interested in ecotourism and wilderness travel. Outdoor opportunities include hiking, horseback riding and river rafting while sandy beaches galore offer diving, snorkeling and sport fishing. The natural beauty and friendly people of Costa Rica keep tourists coming back for more. Mention Costa Rica and people think paradise. The country’s Disney-like creatures, ranging from howler monkeys to toucans, are prolific and relatively easy to spot. The waves are prime, the beauty staggering and the sluggish pace seductive. Costa Rica, despite being such a tiny nation, draws well over a million visitors every year - and you can see why. The incredibly varied topography means you can cruise a cloud forest one day, climb a volcano the next and finish passed out on a hot sandy beach.

Costa Rica: 90% Guatemala: 10%
As seen in Figure 2, people searching for the perfect vacation destination depend almost equally on the information provided by travel agencies and the information provided by their friends or by their acquaintances. For those who have children, their vacation decision is based on attractions that they can participate in. Summer, June and July in particular, are the most popular times for family vacations. I felt that this survey provided me with little insight as to how people choose their vacation destinations, so I decided to design another, this time taking into account if the time of year which they take their vacation is due to their child’s school schedule, the type of resorts/hotels they choose, and which they find more appealing, beaches and resorts of history. Figure 2 shows the survey as well as the answers in percentages.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Percentage total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How do you decide on a vacation destination?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Guide books</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Internet descriptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Travel Agencies</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Word of Mouth</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Historical interest</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Magazines such as Discovery and National Geographic</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Television advertisements</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Is your decision based on the events that your children can participate in?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Yes</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. No</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. I have no children</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What time of the year do you usually take your vacation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Late winter (January, February, March)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Spring (April, May)</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Summer (June, July)</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Fall (August, September, October)</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Winter (November, December)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Is your answer to number 3 based on the fact that you have children?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Yes</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. No</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When choosing a vacation, do you mostly look at destinations with well-known resorts and/or hotels?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Yes</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. No</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Would you ever stay in a place that has no well-known resorts and/or hotels?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Yes</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. No</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How important is it that you know a country’s language before visiting?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Very</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Would like to, but not a necessity</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Minimal</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How important is it that a country takes pride in their preserving their culture, history and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
natural resources?
   a. Very Important .................................................................70%
   b. Mildly Important ..............................................................30%
   c. Not important

9. Would you ever consider going to a country in order to only see historic ruins?
   a. Yes .................................................................60%
   b. No .................................................................40%

10. Would you go to a country to see historic ruins if you were able to visit another country on the same visit?
    a. Yes .................................................................90%
    b. No .................................................................10%

11. Would you ever consider going to a country that does not have a good tourist industry?
    a. Yes .................................................................5%
    b. No .................................................................5%

12. How important is it that your vacation be on or near a beach?
    a. Very important .................................................................20%
    b. Mildly important ..............................................................40%
    c. Not important .................................................................40%

13. How important is it that the country where you are staying has a variety of options, such as swimming in the ocean, scuba diving, wind surfing, dining at fine restaurants, sun bathing, and/or amusement rides?
    a. Very important .................................................................30%
    b. Mildly important ..............................................................50%
    c. Not important .................................................................20%

14. How important is it that the country where you are staying has a variety of options, such as canopy tours, zip lines, volcano hikes, historical sites, nature tours and hiking?
    a. Very important .................................................................10%
    b. Mildly important ..............................................................80%
    c. Not important .................................................................10%

The second survey yielded data which is contradictory to my previous findings. When asking individuals whether they look mostly at destinations with well-known resorts or hotels, half said yes while half said no. When asked if they would ever stay in a country with no well-known resort or hotels, 70% said yes while 30% said no. Surprisingly, 80% of the people surveyed said that they would rather visit a location that has more to with nature than with beaches and amusement parks.

The data collected from the survey is inconsistent with the data previously collected from the travel agencies. The representatives of the travel agencies made it clear that hotels and resorts are a deciding factor in planning a vacation. According to the public, this is not true. Also, an astonishing 80% seem to prefer the attractions of a place which is not commercialized. If this is the case, then why are travel agencies concentrating on selling commercialized destinations for vacations? Why is the tourism media playing this angle? My last and final survey consisted of two questions. Figure 1, questions four and five. These have been included in Figure 1 because they were initially part of the first survey. When combining the results of question 1 on both Surveys 1 and 2, it is obvious that travel agencies do not play as big a role
in deciding a vacation as most people think. It is word of mouth and internet descriptions which are the determining factors. Children also play a role in deciding where to go on vacation. So, with this in mind, I come back to Survey 3. The paragraphs for Survey 3 were compiled from three different internet descriptions of which were published by reliable and well-known names of the travel industry. These descriptions, as well as the pictures which were compiled from the same three sites, were then given to individuals who were asked to read the paragraphs and/or look at photos and answer one question. Which country would you rather go to: Costa Rica or Guatemala? 90% of the individuals surveyed said that they would rather go to Costa Rica because it seems nicer, safer, and there seems to be more for young children to do. Only 10% said that they would choose Guatemala because of their personal interest in history. I find it interesting that 90% of the people took Survey 1 said that they would rather go to Costa Rica while those who took Survey 2 said that the attractions that Guatemala had to offer were more appealing. Questions 14 and 15 were catered specifically to the two countries. It was only after receiving these responses that I worked-up a new survey, including questions about children and personal interests. It seems that children are also a big factor in deciding not only where to go, but when to go. Those who had children stated that the summer months (June and July) and early fall (August) is when they choose to go on vacation because it is when their children are out of school. These months happen to be the months of the rainy season in Guatemala as well as in Costa Rica. This, however, does not seem to impact the tourist industry in either country.

**Conclusion**

I have been able to conclude that the tourism media, such as the internet, as well as other individuals, have a profound influence on where individuals and families decide to visit. The tourism media plays to the senses. The many colorful, exciting photos, as well as the descriptions of places greatly influence potential visitors. If a description is lacking in style and does not seem to offer anything exciting, many people will look for another destination. It is surprising to note that many people, speaking specifically of the travel agents, who had virtually no knowledge of a country, are ready to condemn it and say that it is their fault that they are lacking in the tourism department. According to one agent, foreign investors are the reason that Costa Rica is doing so well while Guatemala is suffering due to its recent Civil War. This is true. The other two, however, knew nothing about it and begrudgingly agreed with me when I explained that Guatemala had the same attractions to offer as Costa Rica. Why would they not try to find information on Guatemala? Why would they not try to find out which tourist agencies catered to this wonderful country?

Given the time constraint, I do not believe that I have collected a sufficient amount of data to formally come to a conclusion. The data that I have varies greatly and is, I believe, inconsistent. If I may project a conclusion, it may be said that travel agencies do not play as great a role in the tourist industry as do online sites and the opinions of people. This statement alone has many flaws. Those who cater to Costa Rica and Guatemala, for example, would suggest Costa Rica as a vacation destination rather than Guatemala because the economy is better in Costa Rica as are the hotels/resorts and the attractions. They do not promote the attractions such as diving, fishing, golfing, volcano hiking, the natural reserves, canopy tours and zip line tours of Guatemala. They concentrate on the fact that Guatemala has a magnificent history and that the only places worth visiting are the Mayan ruins. This is not so. The tourism media in general is to blame for
the lack of tourists coming to Guatemala. In many guide books and travel brochures, as well as online sites, most vacation packages to Costa Rica run anywhere from 10 to 18 days. The packages for Guatemala only suggest 5 to 6 days and many of these packages are extensions. Why is this? Why does the tourism media portray Guatemala as a country with very little to offer compared to Costa Rica? None of my interviews yielded an answer to this question. Also, the idea of “American needs” does not play as big a role as one tourist agent thought. Americans are willing to go to countries without well-known hotels and resorts which have all of the comforts of home. They are willing to step outside of that comfort zone. Why is it that he thinks differently? Does this method of thinking influence the places that he suggest people visit? In the end, it seems that I have more questions than answers.

I think that the tourism media and the way that it portrays certain countries is a problem which needs to be directly addressed. Due to time constraints, I do not believe that I have adequately assessed the issue. I believe that in order for this problem to be adequately assessed and for a formal conclusion to be drawn that months, if not years, of work needs to be done. If given the time, I would have liked to have met with or talked to someone from the US Department of Tourism and the head of both Costa Rica and Guatemala’s Tourism Commissions. I would also like to design a study based on how Americans choose their vacation destination. In order to do this, my sample population would have to be in the thousands and not just 40 individuals. There is a lot of potential good that could come from this study, if given the proper amount of time and dedication.

[Editor’s note: Ms. Kauffeld was unable to complete her stay in Guatemala due to emergency surgery, which was successful. She had to return home after about 3.5 weeks in Guatemala. This project was carried out in the US and submitted to complete her program requirements.]

Endnotes


2 Britannica Online Encyclopedia.

3 Costa Rica Tourist Board, Planet Ware, Lonely Planet, Frommer’s Guide.

4 Guatemalan Tourism Commission (online site), Lonely Planet, Planet Ware, Fodor’s Guide.


7 www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/guatemala.htm.


10 Lonely Planet, Unesco, Insight Guides.