

Overview of International Consulting Experience 2017 - Havana, Cuba:

Cuba is at a critical juncture. Its tourism industry generates more than \$1.2 billion per year, and is one of the most dynamic sectors of its economy. Cuba is already the second-most visited island in the Caribbean after the Dominican Republic. It is faced with the challenge of carefully balancing the demands of the growing number of visitors with the needs of its residents and the natural environment.

The most important challenge Cuba faces is the development of a long-term sustainable vision for tourism growth. Tourism has the potential, if carefully managed, to create a more inclusive and prosperous community, preserve and maintain Cuba's rich cultural and natural heritage, and foster inter-cultural appreciation.

The International Institute of Tourism Studies at GW has been in discussions with the University of Havana to find ways to support applied research, and the sharing of best practices in sustainable tourism development. The aim is to assist the University of Havana to work with the Ministry of Tourism and other key tourism stakeholders to address the critical issues outlined above.

In this context, the University of Havana has indicated its interest in collaborating with the International Institute of Tourism Studies to host an international consulting experience. The University of Havana will serve as the "client". The consulting assignment will focus on three principal objectives:

- 1. Assess the readiness of *casas particulares* and *paladares* to meet the expectations of U.S. visitors, and develop recommendations for enhancing the product offering, ensuring quality assurance, accessing financing, and better positioning and marketing *casas particulares* and *paladares* in Havana City.**

Havana, the most popular tourism destination in Cuba, is consequently the most threatened from the pressures of a booming tourism sector. Havana attracts over a million tourists annually and is considered the new tourism magnet in the Caribbean. The competitiveness of micro and small enterprises, such as *casas particulares* and *paladares*, in Havana is highly contingent on the extent to which these enterprises are able to evolve to meet ever-changing visitor expectations and growing competition from large accommodation providers. Currently, this sector facilitates wider distribution of economic benefits from tourism, and presents an alternative model to the large-scale all-inclusive hotel development model. Airbnb offers more than 2,000 guest homes in Cuba, yet U.S. visitors find it difficult to book high-end accommodations in Havana.¹ This gap may present opportunities and also underscores the urgent need to support micro and small enterprises to evolve and remain competitive. The student

consultants will assess the current situation, and provide tourism product development, quality assurance, and marketing recommendations.

- 2. Assess current community-based tourism products in Havana City, and develop recommendations for the establishment of local creative services such as local guiding services and music, art and culinary products in alignment with the common goal of promoting the area's significant intangible cultural heritage.**

Approaches to tourism community development will be designed collaboratively through participatory projects with relevant and diverse Havana artisanal-level workers, creative people business-owners, government staff, community-based organizations, educational leaders, and scholar-experts. Havana attractions such as its captivating architecture, fascinating little towns, and popular culinary and performing arts places could be organized and marketed as part of a larger effort to link small-business and in-home tourism development to the growing market of international visitors. The student consultants will help provide recommendations based on global best practices that can help Cuba to avoid the pitfalls that less careful tourism development has encountered elsewhere when incorporating the community as part of the tourism experience. The recommendations will be guided by the tenet that tourism, when planned carefully, can help to preserve traditional lifestyle and cultural practices while, at the same time, encouraging the economic empowerment of local communities.

- 3. Assess the potential of attracting and engaging SAVE (Scientific, Academic, Volunteer and Educational) tourism market segments.**

SAVE represents a growing segment of the global tourism industry that differs in several key respects from more conventional forms of mass tourism. It represents a range of tourists who travel to a destination to engage in research, learning or volunteer tourism. By definition, those attracted to SAVE tourism tend to be interested in activities that can be readily harnessed to drive natural and cultural heritage preservation and the improvement of the lives of local people. SAVE activities impact not only local economies but also often lead to longer-term economic benefits at a national and local level by building the capacity of educational, scientific and cultural institutions. SAVE markets can provide a demonstration affect to the local stakeholders about new interests and niche opportunities. The student consultants will aim to assess the fit of this market segment to Havana City's product offering. We believe that attracting SAVE visitors can help to foment sustainable city tourism development in Havana City by helping to finance cultural heritage preservation, also to expand tourism outside of the Old Havana district, and foster responsible educational exchanges.