HAVANA, Cuba. – The general crisis that Cuba is facing would not be news if it weren’t hitting hard the one sector that could make the economy -mired since 1959- revive. In spite of the government’s projections, which still hopes to welcome 2.5 million foreign visitors, the truth is nothing positive is happening in the tourism sector. To the war in Ukraine and the global repercussions of COVID-19, we must add the poor quality of services here, which places Cuba below the competitive standards of the region.

A few days ago, on social media, a video was circulating where a group of Cuban and foreign tourists staged a protest at the Neptuno Hotel, in Miramar, due to a shortage of bottled water, which could not be found in the hotel or in nearby stores, not even in convertible hard-currency stores. It was alarming to corroborate that the indispensable liquid was not available even for those with hard currency, but it was embarrassing to hear the explanations given by a staff member of the Neptuno Hotel. Far from trying to calm down the hotel guests and to find a solution to an error for which the hotel was solely responsible, the staff member rudely and arrogantly addressed the group, true to the way that anyone with the slightest authority behaves, be it a store manager or a minister.
It is difficult to explain to a visitor that drinking water is not available, not even boiled or filtered water like the one available in some Varadero hotels. But that doesn’t justify the continued promotion of Cuba as tourist destination without making it clear to tourists that these shortages exist. Already, we can see groups of tourists walking along the streets of Havana, the sun beating down on them, sweaty and red, asking everywhere if there is water for sale, exposing themselves to swindles, taking the risk of drinking contaminated water, in spite of the Ciego Montero seal and label on the bottles, a practice that has victimized many a foreign visitor causing dire consequences to their health and vacation.

To watch tourists having so much trouble in such a hot, dirty, miserable country, even with the tiny details, where wishy-washy and lackluster best describe the nightlife, makes one wonder why they come here, who recommends to them this expensive and festering destination where not even drinking water can be guaranteed.

Young and old both fall into the trap; but among the young, the shock is worse because they are not content with just staying within the four walls of the hotel. They want to scout the city, but they stumble upon buildings in ruins, unending waiting lines, withering people who are rowdy and poorly dressed, embarrassed by a level of poverty than cannot be overcome, and sick and tired of the preferential treatment tourists receive.

As a result, deep down inside Cubans are happy to see foreign tourists in this predicament, on the verge of fainting, walking the streets in search of a bottle of water and having to make due with a Coke or a Sprite, if they are lucky. Many have quenched their thirst with beer, even when they’re not used to it, nor want it.

To do urban tourism today in Cuba is to go sightseeing among old stones. The lack of options is overwhelming. In the hotels, the discomfort with deficient service and the feeling of having thrown one’s money down the drain, whether you are a foreign visitor, an émigré, or a self-employed Cuban who worked very hard to pay for a “real vacation” for the family, ruins the charm of the first day, and since there are no reimbursements, one has to resign oneself and hope that at least the kids are having a good time.

Several Cuban-American friends, who force themselves to come to Cuba once a
year to be with their family, insist that the key to not having a fit of anger in Varadero and to enjoy the beach at the very least, is to keep expectations low. It’s the only way they can remain calm with the monotonous food options and the deteriorating facilities that once were iconic. Meliá and Iberostar hotels are now low-income tourism destinations, where Cubans (from near and far) are welcome, as are Latinos, Russians, absent-minded Europeans and retired Canadians. Even in those places, the crisis makes itself known, with no concern for what money the clients have spent. Guest rooms in poor condition, mediocre food and faulty cleaning are the things about which clients complain the most. Now we can add the shortage of drinking water, and that goes beyond what’s tolerable.

What happened at the Neptuno Hotel is not an isolated case. Bottled water has become a nightmare for the private sector, who must buy it at the hard-currency stores when it’s available, and compete with hotel demand.

To date, the regime has not mentioned the serious situation. In the meantime, Cuba continues to undergo its metamorphosis into an inhospitable country, where in addition to hunger, there is thirst, torture that tourists suffer the minute they set foot on Cuban soil and they realize that the island of rum, cigars and folklore is a faded post card against an olive-green background.

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