

Contested Tourism Commodities

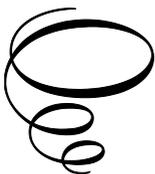
Contested Tourism Commodities:

What's for Sale

By

Konstantinos Tomazos

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have always felt that a subject called international tourism studies could be taught in a simple and easy to understand way. As a result, I changed all my class content to make it more approachable, and engaging, and I started to focus on tourism niches that my students found fun and exciting. Accordingly, although this book is mostly derived from my research, it is also based on discussions, debates, and sometimes strong arguments that have taken place in engaging classes.

These moments, in class, when students feel compelled to argue with their colleagues or me are one of the most fulfilling parts of my job. I sometimes look at them or read their work with a vicarious pride which is not entirely dissimilar from that of a parent, especially when they manage to build on discussions and theory we used in class. So I would like to first thank my students for asking questions and challenging the way I think.

On a more personal note, nothing I do has ever been possible without the support of Patricia, and of late Sofia and Melina who keep me on my toes and put up with my ramblings about this and that.

I am also indebted to my parents Loukia and Lambros to whom I owe everything.

Finally, different people who have granted me generous help in my career and my development as an academic over several years. I cannot name them all, but it is their ideas and actions that inform this book.

PROLOGUE

TOURISM IS ABOUT BEING HUMAN

Let us make one thing clear; this book will not provide a clear definition or a taxonomy of contested commodities in tourism. This might be essential in other research traditions, but one can also convey knowledge without the need for clear definitions. Maybe to some extent, I am using the freedom afforded to me by book writing to avoid formal semantics. To try to determine precisely which criteria apply to different tourism niches, given the beautiful diversity of the human experience would be a futile task. This book deliberates various aspects of human experience that have become commodities in a tourism context. However, nowhere in these pages will one find a definition of what a contested tourism commodity is. If anything, this book has promiscuously selected fascinating topics and perspectives that allow for some embracing, original, and sometimes quirky observations.

This volume is not a textbook, nor a systematic review of the range of studies on different tourism niches and their main drivers. It offers instead a retrospective examination of my understanding of how these niches work and their potential. In the process, this book provides many theories and analytical approaches.

When I considered writing this book, I decided to visit or revisit the niches presented in an almost reflective and thoughtful manner writing from the perspective of a tourism academic. By (re)considering each niche in the light of others, I hope to draw attention to some broader themes that connect them, and longer trajectories that have evolved with them.

Therefore, we take a journey into the heart and soul of some tourism niches that have grown considerably and fortunately or unfortunately, are here to stay. It is immaterial whether one approves of all the rights or wrongs of all tourist phenomena- the fact that they exist is enough to merit our attention as tourism scholars as we strive to understand our field. In this undertaking, we first need to know that we will always be a few steps behind than the most innovative developments in our area. Why is this the case? The answer is simple; tourism is very organic by nature, and change is not facilitated or brought forth by singular actors. In the

vastness of tourism- from small run mamma and papa businesses to corporate conglomerates there is scope for human agency, and a series of choices that have shaped, are shaping and will continue to develop this very complex system of industries. The most thought-provoking part of this is that the influx of technology has dramatically changed the landscape. It has made matters even more convoluted with diverse individuals, with no geographical limitations pursuing their entrepreneurial or otherwise initiative; case and point the phenomena encountered in this book.

In the introduction, we look into the relationship between tourism trends set by the 'elite' and how they are followed by the 'mass' as they strive (in an affordable to them way) to get a glimpse of the glamorous and desirable life of others. Are they successful? The retort is both yes and no; while they do succeed in attaining some 'signs' of this life that they crave, the tragedy of it all is that once one goal is met, it then pales in significance to the attainment of the next goal, and then the next one, and the next one as this vicious cycle keeps growing. On the same token, those who consider themselves the elite, also strive to underline their superiority through their touristic choices and other forms of consumption. As they post their great holidays in exotic paradise on Instagram, someone somewhere is looking on enviously and making plans. They strive to stay at the same hotel, sunbathe on the same beach, even if that would mean saving money, getting a loan or paying by credit card, and worrying about it later, or even begging. With time and with technological advances in transport, this touristic choice becomes commonplace and the elite moves on...closely followed by the rest, which again will look upon with envy, until circumstances change.

It is an exciting game of cat and mouse played out for as long as people have travelled and it is not exclusive to tourist consumption, but it is a trait of how we consume as humans. We are never satisfied, and we always look at what else is there to have. Everything is desirable for a host of different reasons, and our tourist appetite is driven by hedonism, social status attainment, personal validation, voyeurism, curiosity, or vanity, to name a few. This pursuit is endless, a game with a straightforward rule; human behaviour does not change radically, what does is the context as we progress through history.

In Chapter 1, we set the scene by trying to understand how aspects of life transform into commodities and how things end up for sale. Through a discussion on ethical dilemmas and utilising ethical theories, we proceed to illustrate the limits of moral thinking, especially when ethics confront human necessity. By discussing the economics approach to thinking, we

start on a long road of rationalised reasoning that, at least in theory, can justify many behaviours, products, and services. Should there be limits? Should we allow (sometimes) life or the circumstances to step in and place such limits and boundaries? If that is the case, what pushes the envelope further?

In Chapter 2, we discuss slum tourism and its key drivers and characteristics. From slumming a couple of centuries ago to its contemporary form, slum tourism has organically grown to what we encounter today in different settings and different circumstances. The question we seek to answer is an obvious one; should poverty and deprivation become tourism commodities of experiencing the lives of others; or put in an even more blunt way, should poverty become a tourism asset, like scenery, heritage, weather, etc. In our discussion, we peel away the layers of slum tourism, query what is for sale, if not the poverty per se, then perhaps the perception of poverty in the mind of the visitor, which in turn the tourists experience. If the tours are subject to staging and if the tourists only see what they expect to see as part of the staging process, then one could say poverty is not a commodity, but the perception of it is. Does this change anything? Does slum tourism become more agreeable in this case?

In Chapter 3, we illustrate that dark tourism and dark tourism sites are both prolific and ambiguous. We discuss how areas of catastrophe at a blink of an eye could become tourist attractions and draw visitors. Is this in bad taste? With my students in class when we reach this point, I always present them this following scenario; imagine a tsunami has just hit your fishing village and you are busy sifting through the ruins and trying frantically to find your belongings. Out of nowhere, some foreigners appear and start to snap away taking photographs and looking around. At this point, the students say that had they been the man in the scenario, they would like no intruders and peace to deal with their misery. When the same scene plays out with the only difference being that the foreigner leaves some money, the students start to disagree with one another as they see the potential to help the man out of this crisis. This small variation in the scenario makes all the difference. Can we decide what is best for the man in both situations? Let us not forget this man did not actively try to get money from the visitor. The visitor found him and presented him with some cash. This scenario is in the heart of dark tourism as it develops organically. When soldiers died at the Battle of Waterloo, they had no idea that a few weeks later, people will be

touring the site and picking up souvenirs- yet this is precisely what happened. People show interest, and someone seizes the opportunity.

To illustrate this opportunism in action, we use examples of selected sites to demonstrate the need for a line in the sand in terms of what should become a dark tourism site and what should not. This line of thinking leads us to the issue of changing audiences and desensitisation. In this context, dark tourism sites may be facing a new reality where they may have to become more graphic and more explicit about what has taken place to keep visitors coming.

In Chapter 4, we introduce volunteer tourism and its temporal dynamics. The scene is nowadays almost typical, and it repeatedly transpires in different parts of the world. Predominantly, young, enthusiastic volunteers using the services of sending organisations- project brokers- to travel and try to make a difference. Their intentions are beyond reproach, but servicing and catering for such an 'army' of volunteers have led to standardisation and blueprinting. The economic success, along with the attractive business proposition that it represents signals opportunity to many, and the lack of regulation means that there is a proliferation of approaches and projects. This ambiguity has led to controversy and the controversy to criticism. Several sending organisations are at the time of writing trying to diversify their offering and rewrite the narrative by pushing for 'responsible' volunteer tourism.

Nevertheless, as we are going to see, this is counter-productive. In the case of volunteer tourism, there can never be a now and for all-time single specific breakthrough or model, which will solve all problems and settle, all debates in the field. We need to accept that today's solution to the problems of volunteer tourism could be tomorrow's problem. The inherent ambiguity and relative novelty of volunteer tourism as a DIY charity and profit hybrid mean that there is a blank canvas to be painted, and mistakes have and will be made. Hence, what is important is to gather information and learn from inevitable mistakes and oversights, but also monitor different stakeholders to ensure that the exploration of volunteer tourism as an economic activity does not turn into exploitation.

In Chapter 5, we investigate cosmetic surgery tourism. While this book only discusses trends in elective cosmetic surgery, it is evident that specialised agencies take on the roles of travel agents and surgical consultants, while hospitals are increasingly adding 'hotel' services and hotels are integrating 'hospital' services. This trend allows individuals the opportunity to save money, but also the chance to recuperate in an exotic

setting, a fact not lost on the agencies and their websites. What becomes apparent is that smart marketers sell the fantasy of plastic surgery in an exotic environment. Is this in breach of medical ethics? By their overselling the benefits and downplaying the risks, more people join this trend and get surgeries abroad that sometimes are of questionable quality and with mixed standards of screening and aftercare that, in the end, could create new demands on the already stretched resources of health provision bodies. Key to this phenomenon is the way people prescribe to this fantasy of escaping themselves and their limitations.

This theme resonates in the case of Girlfriend Experiences abroad in Chapter 6. Purposefully designed websites serve the interests of agents who serve as both travel agents and ‘matchmakers’ -to put it tactfully-catering for a market of tourists who seek the perfect holiday with their dream holiday-companion. The whole package available for purchase aims to deliver the message of privacy, exclusivity and in many cases eroticism. While sex is not explicitly mentioned (for legal reasons), it is subtly or less subtly implied on the websites. Why is this trend in this book? Only because it makes the point that trends develop, grow, and become more segmented and specialised. The market strives to rectify its inefficiencies, so no wasting time seeking a companion, or buying them drinks with no guaranteed results. The GFE confirms the presence of a companion and removes uncertainty. In both chapters, we can see that what is on sale is the opportunity to purchase a dream version of one’s self. In the case of cosmetic surgery, is a better looking, more attractive self (at the cost of going under the knife with permanent consequences) and in the case of the GFE the dream of becoming beautiful and desirable via the means of simulation and staging of the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Both these cases benefit from the mobility afforded by tourism, and both instances push the boundaries on what tourism is.

In Chapter 7, we turn our attention to spirituality, and the sharing economy and how they foresee the development of new tourism products and mobility opportunities. At the heart of this ‘movement’ is the ideal of individuals and groups peer-to-peer sharing without the involvement of other parties. This ideology, in many ways, has already ‘left the building’. This model has now been appropriated by powerful actors that are tapping in this shift from ownership to use. More and more services and goods are falling into the scope of this supposedly new economy that finds ample room in the ever-changing market. There is a certain allure in this sharing

boom. Firstly for apparent reasons, it is far cheaper to use something rather than owning it, and ownership comes with added costs and responsibility.

In contrast, mere use is flexible and is mostly about instrumentality and enjoyment. At the time of writing, the P2P world of sharing goods and services is relatively unregulated. There are several grey areas, loopholes, and irregularities that in the future will come to the crosshairs of regulating bodies, as governments will step in to plug any gaps and to regulate and tax such services. The battle-lines are already drawn, as these new forms of sharing may be disrupting existing interests and markets, and the armies are mobilising. There is already a backlash towards sharing organisations like Uber (by taxi drivers), and Air BnB (by hotel owners). Only governments can now step in and regulate these services more tightly. In tourism terms, it is all about getting a backstage glimpse that typical tourists do not get. It is about seeing the lives of others and stepping in their shoes. The increased commercialisation of goods and services and especially that of hospitality exchanges is already indicating where this is heading, especially with the game-changing influx of Instagram and social media influencers (SMIs) in tourism. To some extent, these exciting trends have led to the extreme democratisation of travel. One exciting development of this trend is also the emergence of the new controversial trend of beg-packing that has polarised the travel community.

Does this book answer all of the questions it poses? Probably not, if anything it raises new ones. However, this is not surprising. What would be the outcome of merging conspicuous consumption, human desire, and the immediacy and outreach offered by the internet? The answer is new tourism niches, and the forces that have created them are here to stay. If anything, this process is becoming even more potent as people, especially in the western world, feel entitled to unique travel experiences. We can draw similarities with the days of the grand tour; young people from the aristocracy were exercising their privilege, entitlement, and birthright by travelling to the old world. Similarly, westerners exercise their privilege; they use credit cards, their savings, and their disposable income, emanating by dint of their culture and history. In the book, we resist the temptation of making a neocolonialist argument to deconstruct tourist behaviour, and perhaps this is a wise choice as the phenomenon of beg-packing is presenting a new paradigm of fluid relationships and identities, which of course merit further research.

The leitmotif of this book is to challenge our shared understanding of what tourism is and to offer a common-sense understanding of the

relationships that develop when a tourism niche takes hold. Such niches are ubiquitous and problematic, but whatever our fears or concerns over the commodification of different aspects of the tourist experience, merely trying to oppose them does not help anyone. The idea that commodification somehow renders things meaningless and inhumane is somewhat misguided. There are good uses of the outcomes of this process, but also horrible ones. Whether we agree or like some tourism niches, contested commodities in tourism do not just happen in a vacuum; they develop organically to fill a gap in demand as capitalist forces decode human desire. This process is unstoppable, because our imagination, and hence our desires and curiosity are boundless.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, as a conglomeration of activities, services, and industries that deliver a travel experience can today be recognised as a “multifaceted phenomenon” spanning through a combination of key sectors, presented through an extensive range of actors. Travel reflects ‘the hyper-complexity of society,’¹ an apparent outlet for an increasingly growing field of more “refined” tourists demanding specialist tourism experiences². However, who are these more refined tourists, what makes them different, and why their determination to be different is of vital importance to understand how tourism works?

Our story begins in ancient Rome, densely populated, crowded, and noisy. Not wanting to get too graphic, but we can all imagine what it felt like to live in Rome during the hot summer months, as sanitation was poor. Those who had the means needed to escape, so they followed the Imperial court to their summer villas to the countryside or further afield to the Las Vegas of the time, Pompeii. Key to this is the dichotomy between those with the means to escape, horse and carriages, wealth, leisure time; and those who had no means and had to persevere. Now let us fast-forward through history to the court of King George III; he suffered from a peculiar condition at the time (known today as porphyria) which caused the king to have aches and pains and among other symptoms turned his urine blue. One of the royal doctors suggested that bathing in seawater would help, and so the king and his entourage headed for the seaside. The aristocracy inevitably followed the king's court and swiftly excursions to the shore became the new trend, and the place to be. Those who did not have the means to escape looked on with envy and dreamed of the seaside.

To the horror of the aristocracy, the invention of the train changed everything as the masses became mobile and able to reach places previously reserved for the refined, the elite minority. There are numerous stories and

¹ Lars Qvortrup, “The Aesthetics Of Interference: From anthropocentrism to polycentrism and the reflections of digital art” (paper presented at the Conference on aesthetics and new media, 1998).

² N Prabakaran and N Panchanatham, “Niche Tourism Products of India,” *Abasyn University Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2013).

anecdotes of the elite looking on in horror as the ‘unwashed masses’³ descended upon them and their excursion space. The railways forced the elite to seek ‘refuge’ in Italy, France or Spain, where the masses, for some time, could not follow. Gradually, the hoi polloi caught up. Hence, the chase continued, as their means and privilege took them further, opening up the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Pacific as tourist destinations. Inevitably, the pursuit ceased to be about geography and distance, and it became about price and facilities. So expensive cruises which have now also become democratised to a large extent became a temporary shelter for those who wanted to exercise their privilege and demonstrate how unique and different they were. Temporary is, of course, the right word, as the former bastion of refined elegance and sophistication, the cruise, has now fallen victim to last-minute deals and cheap pricing. This trend has fostered a culture of rowdy partying demonstrated by the recent shocking scenes of young revellers onboard P&O’s flagship *Britannia*.⁴ One can only imagine the horror in the eyes of other cruise-goers when they realised that their cruise had descended into just another raucous Saturday night in any city-centre in the UK. It is not too far-fetched to assume that the majority looking in disbelief at the antics of the few would try to avoid these individuals on their next cruise

This example illustrates how trying to avoid or exclude others can also lead to the development of new niches. In this process, new forms of tourism, for exclusive travel for the more refined, the sensitive and the unique emerge, where the customer, at least in the beginning, makes up for the small volume business model of the operators. You can see of course where this is going; the ultimate frontier now, in this game of ‘catch me if you can,’ is space, and it would take some time for affordable space tourism to become available to the masses.

What this short history lesson can teach us is that tourism consumption feeds off the desire to be different and outdo one another. Today, people buy gossip magazines or follow celebrities on social media to see where they are taking their holidays. Then they try to capture for themselves a bit of this glamour. In a sense, behaviour does not change in

³ Edward Bulwer Lytton Baron Lytton and Paul Clifford, *Paul Clifford. By the author of Pelham, etc. [The dedicatory epistle signed: ELB, i.e. Edward GEL Bulwer, afterwards Bulwer-Lytton.]* (Baudry’s European Library, 1833).

⁴ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/travel/9628369/all-inclusive-cruise-holiday-sex-violence-booze/>
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/27/po-cruise-passenger-playing-clown-sparks-mass-brawl-families/>

tourism. What does change, is the context that, of course, hinges on the zeitgeist and circumstances of the era.

This game is not only played across classes, but also inter-class as well; we all like to brag about our holidays, and the choices we make and our travel itineraries reveal a lot about ourselves. People want to be different, and they like to stand out from their friends and family, or in recent years, people want to put their exploits on social media and rub in other people faces their perfect little lives. It may sound cynical but most of us, while we want to fit in, we also desire to be a minority, be different; unfortunately, though, it is impossible always to be in the minority. Tourism marketers understand this very well, and over the years, the tourism market has become more and more segmented to meet the needs of tourists as individuals.

This drive has led to the advancement of 'niche tourism interpreted as the opposition to the homogeneous and undifferentiated mass tourism product⁵, within an increasingly competitive and cluttered tourism environment⁶. Such tourism dilutes the 'function' of mass-tourism orientated travel agencies,⁷ as a form of alternative travel that distances itself from the 'commercial arena' of high expenditure-and-profit tourism⁸. These 'alternative' forms of tourism strive to evade the traditional 'sun-sea-sand' product and feature as a new hope for providing consistency through the offering of natural, social, and community values⁹. As the quest for the 'alternative' grows, Gnevosa affirms that there has been a definite shift from wholly external determinants, such as climate and security,¹⁰ towards

⁵ Okechukwu Nwafor, "Niche tourism and the challenges of developing medical tourism in the Western Cape Province of South Africa," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3, no. 4 (2012).

⁶ Jane Ali-Knight, "The role of niche tourism products in destination development" (Edinburgh Napier University, 2010).

⁷ De-Jung Chen, "Global concept, local practice: Taiwanese experience of CouchSurfing," *Hospitality & Society* 1, no. 3 (2012).

⁸ Cathy Yang Liu and Gary Painter, "Travel behavior among Latino immigrants: The role of ethnic concentration and ethnic employment," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32, no. 1 (2012).

⁹ Loizos Christou, "Is it possible to combine mass tourism with alternative forms of tourism: The case of Spain, Greece, Slovenia and Croatia," *Journal of business administration online* 11, no. 1 (2012).

¹⁰ "Phenomenon of Couchsurfing as Alternative Tourism," Isthia, 2011, accessed 25/03/16, <http://www.isthia.fr/core/modules/download/download.php>.

private incentives of self-development and creative expression.¹¹ In like manner, Patarchanov attempts to construe the ‘substantial feature’ of this type of tourism as the apparent avoidance of “unilateral enrichment” through the promotion of localised economic development, with those choosing to ‘go alternative’ typically possessing a higher degree of culture and ‘lore.’¹²

To further illustrate, individuals seek familiar or strange settings within their travel.¹³ Some tourists are less adventurous than others are, with a fixed, packaged itinerary and no room for decision making, while others strive to get off the beaten track. Not everyone though wants to give up comfortable accommodation and tourism services. So the market will cater to them creating a façade, of going off the beaten track with extra amenities. For example, camping has its glamorous off-shoot, glamping, and backpacking flashpacking. Finally, some tourists yearn to venture beyond the norm and forgo all tourist services, and any form of familiarity. However, as their number grows, so does the supply; so familiarity returns with a vengeance and the tourists have to venture even further beyond the norm seeking spaces where novelty is at a total maximum. The following chapters, as we discuss different tourism trends, will illustrate this point.

Within a world where travellers are becoming increasingly ‘acquainted’ with cultures antonymous to their own,¹⁴ tourists are today on a quest for ‘authenticity.’ Primarily raised by MacCannell within his work on ‘staged authenticity’, the concept is ‘owner’ to an array of interpretations within the practice of tourism,¹⁵ with etymological roots to the ancient Greek ‘authentikos’ - original, genuine, principal- clearly traced back to ‘authentēs’ – one acting on one’s authority¹⁶. According to Urry¹⁷ and

¹¹ Kostas Tomazos, Kevin O’Gorman, and Andrew C MacLaren, “From leisure to tourism: How BDSM demonstrates the transition of deviant pursuits to mainstream products,” *Tourism Management* 60 (2017).

¹² Plamen Patarchanov, “Role and place of alternative tourism development in mountain areas,” *Journal of Settlements and Spatial Planning* (2012).

¹³ Jari JärviLuoma, “Alternative tourism and the evolution of tourist areas,” *Tourism Management* 13, no. 1 (1992).

¹⁴ Avril Drummond and Jo Campling, *Research methods for therapists* (Springer, 2013).

¹⁵ Dean MacCannell, “Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings,” *American journal of Sociology* (1973).

¹⁶ Illinka Terziyska and SN Rislki, “Interpretations of authenticity in tourism,” *Science & Research* 4 (2012).

¹⁷ John Urry, “The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies, theory, culture & society,” (London: Sage, 1990).

Denzin¹⁸ contemporary trends in tourism, along with the “sociological discourse” of subsequent tourists, has led to the replacing of “modernist theory with post-modernist thought.” This trend can be closely related to the substantial abundance of ‘speciality travel’ experiences options now possible within the industry; including ecotourism, heritage tourism, volunteer tourism, adventure tourism, to name a few.

Within this realm of ‘alternativeness,’ an era of ever-growing mobility and the continuous blurring of identities see individuals as no longer ‘enmeshed within interconnected circles,’ but instead standing outside them.¹⁹ As consumption is focusing more on the individual, tourists seek more tailor-made experiences that relate to them at an existential level. This trend undoubtedly counteracts the ‘grand theories’ and their ‘tendency to conceptualise societies as totalities,’²⁰ and it embraces the notion of “non-dualistic” and “non-hierarchical” logic found within post-modern theories.²¹ Urieli aptly endorsed two frameworks of thought; the ‘Simulational’ and ‘Other tourist.’ Fundamentally, the ‘Other Tourist’ can be linked to MacCannell’s ‘quest for authenticity,’ as a form of ‘real’ tourism, counteracting conventional mass tourism.²² The Simulational Tourist hinges on Boorstin’s discussion of ‘pseudo-events’ and the fact that tourism always leads to simulation²³, reflecting the ambiguous truth that appeals to the individual’s desire to be informed.²⁴ In general, the study of authenticity branches in three main perspectives, namely, modernism/realism, constructivism and postmodernism. While modernism/realism focuses on authenticity as a scientific concept based on artefacts, cuisines, dress and culture, (to name a few) constructivists believe that authenticity is an unfixed personal reality, which hinges on an individual’s beliefs and subjective outlook. Postmodernists, on the other hand, believe that

¹⁸ Norman KK Denzin, *Images of postmodern society: Social theory and contemporary cinema*, vol. 11 (Sage, 1991).

¹⁹ Bernice A Pescosolido and Beth A Rubin, “The web of group affiliations revisited: Social life, postmodernism, and sociology,” *American Sociological Review* (2000).

²⁰ Natan Urieli, “Theories of modern and postmodern tourism,” *Annals of tourism research* 24, no. 4 (1997).

²¹ Patti Lather, “Drawing the line at angels: Working the ruins of feminist ethnography,” *International journal of qualitative studies in education* 10, no. 3 (1997).

²² Johan R Edelheim, *Tourist attractions: From object to narrative*, vol. 46 (Channel View Publications, 2015).

²³ D Boorstin, *The image: A guide to pseudoevents in American society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

²⁴ Catalin Postelnicu and Dan-Cristian Dabija, “Challenges and Development Prospects for Tourism in Romania,” *Ecoforum* 5, no. 1 (2016).

authenticity is irrelevant to many tourists who are aware that authenticity is staged reality. They see it for what it is- a façade.

While it is impossible to define authenticity, or what authenticity is to all tourists at an existential level, for this book, we will accept a more fluid idea of value, satisfaction or even just enjoyment as authenticity. This kind of touristic relativism falls, perfectly in line with postmodern thinking, and theorising. Accordingly, tourist A's quest for meaning may centre on the authenticity of a tangible or toured object, such as a cultural artefact or event, seeking signs of realness or genuineness (location, era, its creator). Conceivably, viewers would assess if the object were what it claimed to be, affirming its status. This status could be what adds value to the experience. However, the same item, at the same location, during the same viewing, could gain a different meaning. It may also signify a feeling of nostalgia for a time when everything was hand-made in contrast to the alienating nature of meaningless machine-mass production.

So, we can see that the toured object, radiates meaning in two ways, by dint of its objective characteristics, but also by the experience or life-story of the viewer. In a sense, there is a link between the two. The viewer in both cases needs to create a narrative to surround the viewing, whether it is the background knowledge or information on the quality or value of the object or the life-story laden with meaning. The above example illustrates that individuals are prone to maintain different perspectives, and may see things differently depending on context or situation. Respectively, a thought-provoking point surfaces: If tourists are happy to perceive the toured object as authentic, then essentialist properties of the object become irrelevant, and it all becomes a performance, with actors, a stage, and a script to follow.

Staging, undeniably, leads to staged authenticity, whereby hosts put their culture "on-sale" to create an "appealing package" for the tourist²⁵, with tourism pinned as a "game" to enchant guests within a series of "performances".²⁶ Such performances fall within the communication system of the 'kartié,' the staging of public 'facades' that allow social actors to entice spectators, to anticipate mockery within sociability networks, and

²⁵ Deepak Chhabra, Robert Healy, and Erin Sills, "Staged authenticity and heritage tourism," *Annals of tourism research* 30, no. 3 (2003).

²⁶ David Picard, "White magic: An anthropological perspective on value in Antarctic tourism," *Tourist Studies* 15, no. 3 (2015).

subsequently minimise impacts through the luring of 'images' in a particular direction.²⁷

TOURISM AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

Tourism commodities gain hyper-value based on their symbolic status enhanced by the add-on perceived value in the eyes of the tourist. To appreciate how this works, we need to, at least for a moment, see social reality as the construction of things that only exist, as a simulation of something else comprised of signs and signals. The brilliant work of Baudrillard on simulation is key to the study of authenticity in tourism. His "hyper-realism of simulation," whereby the 'real' is no longer the object of representation, but the "ecstasy of denial," within its own ritual extermination goes a long way to explaining how simulation in tourism works, and why tourists accept it.²⁸ Besides, elements such as mass media, advertising, and digital photography have "altered" the 'authentic' experience to the point that "reality is only recognised when it is reproduced in a simulation."²⁹

Hinkes-Jones brings forward Prete's case of the "Santa Claus Industry,"³⁰ whereby "contemporary society is dominated by spectacle."³¹ The study concentrates on Santa Claus as a western 'cultural product,' a 'simulacrum' of the original, widely reproduced for touristic purposes, ultimately turned into a commodity for consumption. Santa Claus went through a similar process before he became a western cultural product, a simulacrum of the original archetype whose roots disappear in history and lore. Now, this amalgam of history, myth, and commercialisation perseveres and remains available for consumption even in non-Christian countries; it has ultimately turned into a commodity for consumption.

Fundamentally, such experiences maintained through elements of 'mystification' become false and inauthentic. Nevertheless, as observed by

²⁷ Jacky Simonin, Michel Watin, and Eliane Wolff, "Médias, école et" kartié" à La Réunion: des espaces en contact," *Saint-Denis: URA 1041* (1993).

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "De la séduction," *New York* (1979).

²⁹ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas* (Blackwell Oxford, 2003).

³⁰ Michael Prete, "Postmodern tourism: the Santa Claus industry," *Annals of Tourism Research* 22, no. 1 (1995).

³¹ Llewellyn Hinkes-Jones, "Why IT workers Should Unionize," *The Atlantic* (2011).

MacCannell,³² in some cases, mystification may indeed be required to establish the perception of ‘real reality’; whereby the truth can no longer speak for itself, therefore it must be ‘revealed.’

A considerable amount of literature on authenticity centres on the effect of commodification and the puzzle it poses. Tourism consumption has the potential to render over-time the original destinations and services inauthentic raising a new problem. If the search for authenticity in itself involves taking on the role of the tourist, then it is pointless, as it is the presence of tourist culture that commodifies the object, destination, and services, which will lead to a lack of authenticity.³³ In this light, once an artefact, service, or event enters the tourist system and rational sphere, it becomes a commodity and consequently loses its meaning and erodes its authentic status.³⁴

Bruner suggests that the search for authenticity in MacCannell’s sense encompasses the desire for a purer society, not tarnished by modernity. As such, tourists are searching for a vanished reality, and authentic ideas, which cannot surface in an increasing commodified and capitalist world.³⁵ Capitalism’s capacity to transform an experience or destination into a commodity receives the blame for conjuring inauthenticity and deceiving tourist consciousness³⁶. Thus, the commodification hypothesis implies that cultural objects available for tourist consumption make staged authenticity apparent. Therefore, tourists dissatisfied with the inauthentic, covet the backstage. They yearn to experience the ‘reality’ that supposedly exists there, which is not touched by capitalist systems and their mundane routine.

³² MacCannell, “Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings.”

³³ E. Cohen, “Authenticity and commoditization in tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 15, no. 3 (1988); Dean MacCannell, *Empty meeting grounds: The tourist papers* (Routledge, 2002).

³⁴ Cohen, “Authenticity and commoditization in tourism.”; Davydd J Greenwood, “Culture by the pound: An anthropological perspective on tourism as cultural commoditization,” *Culture by the pound: an anthropological perspective on tourism as cultural commoditization.*, no. Ed. 2 (1989); MacCannell, *Empty meeting grounds: The tourist papers*.

³⁵ Edward M Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as authentic reproduction: A critique of postmodernism,” *American anthropologist* 96, no. 2 (1994).

³⁶ Hyounggon Kim and Tazim Jamal, “Touristic quest for existential authenticity,” *Annals of tourism research* 34, no. 1 (2007); Donald L Redfoot, “Touristic authenticity, touristic angst, and modern reality,” *Qualitative sociology* 7, no. 4 (1984).

In effect, tourists become tired of interchangeable rooms and the serial reproduction of culture. Routine is provoking tourists to seek 'reality' and authenticity elsewhere, which has consequently led to reinterpretations of the truth and what is 'real.' Individuals are losing attachments to things that once possessed meaning and are increasingly developing a fascination with the real-life of others. Modern society, in many respects, is inauthentic and produces a sense of alienation, which, in turn, leaves individuals longing for authentic experiences. The symptoms that modernity creates such as alienation, conformity, and anxiety act as barriers to achieving authenticity in everyday life, which consequently triggers the search for the authentic through tourism.

However, in this sense, what renders the search for authenticity a Sisyphean task is that the very appearance of tourists will endanger the 'real,' authentic state, and tourists have to feed off the scraps of 'pseudo-events.'³⁷ Therefore, the following question arises; can tourists attain authenticity, and does it matter? Commodification alters the meanings of objects, events, and practices in such a way that over time, they grow to be meaningless. Greenwood makes a point referring to Alarde, a public ritual in Spain, that when the ritual has become a performance for money, the meaning disappears. In this view, once a cultural product enters tourist consumption, the required assembly and enactment corrupt its original meaning.³⁸ Additionally, the authentic aura fades once an object becomes a tourism product, and estranged from the primitive sphere. However, to some extent, commodification does not always destroy the meaning; but rather, it may transform or add new significance to it.³⁹

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in the backstage areas, particularly regarding niche tourism segments such as slum tourism and dark tourism, which surrender the back region for commodification. However, commodification results in generating additional back-regions and tourists fail to achieve their search for authenticity. In this process, forms of travel once considered more authentic and 'off the beaten track' become less alternative. They become increasingly commoditised, homogenised, and entered the mainstream, resulting in generic inauthentic experiences.

³⁷ Boorstin, *The image: A guide to pseudoevents in American society*.

³⁸ Greenwood, "Culture by the pound: An anthropological perspective on tourism as cultural commoditization."

³⁹ Cohen, "Authenticity and commoditization in tourism."

This signifies the problematic issue of the McDonaldization of travel when searching for the authentic.⁴⁰ Backpackers, for example, seek authenticity and attempt to traverse new thresholds to achieve their goal. However, at the same time, this contributes to the commodification of the experience. The once unique path becomes the one most commonly explored, implying a mere ‘pseudo-event.’⁴¹ This reinforces the position that the increasing commodification of travel, has turned escape from routine life into an additional routine.⁴² Therefore, in this sense, tourism fails to offer freedom in which one can experience authenticity.

The role of the tour itself does away with the real, authentic state, and therefore, the search for authenticity is profoundly elusive. In other words, the presence of tourist culture diminishes the authentic state and transforms back regions into a mere show and performance. Although a tourist’s search can advance along the scale, it is implausible that the tourist will reach the furthest back region due to the tourist role itself.⁴³

A destination receiving an influx of tourists is subject to damage, as local customs and traditions become tourism commodities, representing characteristics of a frontstage⁴⁴ rendering the experience inauthentic.⁴⁵

The tourists’ search for authenticity is reminiscent of the punishment of King Tantalus in Greek mythology. Zeus banished Tantalus to Tartarus for trying to deceive the Gods. There he agonised for eternity, submerged in a lake surrounded by fruitful trees tormented by thirst and hunger. However, when he would look down to drink the water, the level of the lake would drop. He could almost touch the fruit above him until the wind pushed the branches further away. The objects of his desire were so near and at the same time, so distant. In analogous terms, just as the back region is almost in reach, where the ‘real’ and authentic lie, it eventually exceeds the tourists grasp due to their inability to separate from their role. Thus, the

⁴⁰ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of society* (Pine Forge Press, 1992).

⁴¹ Boorstin, *The image: A guide to pseudoevents in American society*; N. Ooi and J.H. Laing, “Backpacker tourism: sustainable and purposeful? Investigating the overlap between backpacker tourism and volunteer tourism motivations,” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 18, no. 2 (2010).

⁴² G Llewellyn Watson and Joseph P Kopachevsky, “Interpretations of tourism as commodity,” *Annals of tourism research* 21, no. 3 (1994).

⁴³ Richard Sharpley, *Tourism, tourists and society* (Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁴ Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, “Grounded tourists, travelling theory,” *Tourism: Between place and performance* (2002).

⁴⁵ Kjell Olsen, “Authenticity as a concept in tourism research: The social organization of the experience of authenticity,” *Tourist studies* 2, no. 2 (2002).

tourist quest for authenticity is as futile as Tantalus reaching agonisingly for some fruit or water.

There are infinite scenarios that will lead to the same outcome as entering one perceived back region will generate an endless number of back regions, just like in Zeno's dichotomy paradox. Zeno decides to walk to the park to get some fresh air. To walk to the park, he gets half the distance and needs to walk the remaining half. However, the remaining half splits in half, and this occurs infinitely, suggesting that reaching the park is impossible. In the same sense, the back region is cut in half, creating more and more back zones which the furthest can never be reached. In other words, as soon as the tourist arrives at the ultimate back region, the performance begins, and authenticity shifts further away from the tourists' grasp. Therefore, arguably, there are infinite back regions and forever hidden depths to social settings, and as such, to tourist experiences as well.

However, suggesting that authenticity is unattainable due to the tourist role is a rather absolutist and purist argument. Tourists are painfully aware of their role and its negative effect on authenticity. So, they attempt to alter or transcend their role by participating in the experience rather than simply gazing. For instance, tourists can achieve an authentic experience by excelling their traditional role through immersing and engaging themselves in the tourism product.⁴⁶ New forms of travel and a sincere cosmopolitan attitude push people to strive for experiences that would allow them to become indistinguishable from the locals in a global village. They shun traditional forms of hospitality, and they seek to engage the hosts at a ground level in an attempt to avoid tourist stereotypes. Tourists are not chameleons, but where is the harm in trying?

Despite this perceived lack of authenticity, tourism remains and will retain its dominant place in human culture. Tourists can confront the emptiness and alienation of modernity in a space that is distinct from the dominant institutions. In contrast to mundane everydayness, tourism shines as "simpler, freer, more spontaneous, and more authentic,"⁴⁷ facilitating a temporary break from normality and the constraining norms of everyday life.⁴⁸ Moreover, tourism offers people an opportunity to view their life from

⁴⁶ Yvonne Payne Daniel, "Tourism dance performances authenticity and creativity," *Annals of Tourism Research* 23, no. 4 (1996).

⁴⁷ Ning Wang, "Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience," *Annals of tourism research* 26, no. 2 (1999): 360.

⁴⁸ D Brown, "Genuine fakes' in Selwyn, T.(ed.) *The Tourist Image: myths and myth making in tourism*," (Wiley: London, 1996); Richard Handler, "Authenticity," *Anthropology today* 2, no. 1 (1986); MacCannell, "Staged authenticity: Arrangements of

a different perspective as well as leading one to realise or express their authentic self. In this respect, tourism acts as a vehicle for relief from alienation. However, this is conditioned on the belief that the self at home is not one's authentic self,⁴⁹ and the tourist embarks on a quest to find just that, giving rise to the tourism niches explored in this book.

We will return to authenticity and the tourists' quest for it at different points in this book, but also in the last chapter when we are looking ahead to the trends that will influence new tourism niches. However, what we must take away from this discussion is the playful attitude of tourists, when they take on their tourist role. In many ways, tourists express their identity, by putting on and taking off hats, or masks, as they respond to cues both extrinsic and intrinsic. So, on one holiday, they may be party- people, painting the town (any town) red. On their next experience, they may choose to become pious pilgrims or eco-warriors. This playful freedom to take on identities, to pursue one's authenticity, free from constraints, expectations, and rules allows tourists to enter Heidegger's play-space, the 'Spielraum.'⁵⁰ They can become romantic lovers, and why not, even willing proactive volunteers that wish to play missionary or Messiah for a few weeks, what is certain though is that what the tourist perceives as the backstage is just the front to an infinite backspace.

However, how does one become aware of their dissatisfaction with the norm, the beaten track, and the mainstream? Some people are perfectly happy to partake in packaged, homogenised, and standardised tourist experiences; and others are not; what makes them different?

DIFFERENT PATHS TO AUTHENTICITY: FROM SEEKING THE OTHER TO SENSATION- SEEKING AND DEVIANCE

All tourists are different. Although sometimes it may be useful to place them within categories and typologies, we cannot escape the realisation that they are also individuals. They have different backgrounds, desires, and make different choices. Some seek meaning through hunting and killing magnificent animals (see chapter 1). Some search for authenticity and immersion by seeking the other (see Chapter 2); and by exercising

social space in tourist settings.”; Victor Turner, “The center out there: Pilgrim's goal,” *History of religions* 12, no. 3 (1973).

⁴⁹ Robert Shepherd, “Commodification, culture and tourism,” *Tourist studies* 2, no. 2 (2002).

⁵⁰ Jeff Malpas, “Heidegger, space, and world,” *Heidegger and Cognitive Science* (2012).

empathy to human suffering (see Chapters 3, 4). Others seek to create a new self via plastic surgery (see Chapter 5). In contrast, others pursue to transcend themselves through testing themselves, and pursuing deviance and sexual thrills (see Chapters 3, 6), but also through spiritual experiences, and drug use (see Chapter 7). The common denominator of such pursuits is a shift to the extreme.

The increased participation in such “extreme” activities can find impetus in increased media exposure and extensive advertising across all traditional media channels.⁵¹ The increased demand for high-risk leisure traces back to the 1960s and 1970s as participants embraced the lifestyle and philosophies of high-risk leisure pursuits.⁵² These leisure pursuits have many terms including: “extreme, alternative, and lifestyle, whiz, action, and panic, post-modern, post-industrial and new sport.”⁵³ Individuals that actively pursue high-risk leisure activities appear in the academic literature as Edgeworkers.⁵⁴ The activities of edgework relate to activities in which there is a chance of great bodily harm and even death for individuals. In these terms, the edge is a boundary in which the edge worker must traverse the limits of their body and mind in an endeavour to reach peak experiences, and ultimate sensations, combining exhilaration with the sense of danger.

In 1893 Wilhelm Wundt researched optimum levels of stimulation (OLS) and optimum level of arousal (OLA). Wundt found that both stimulation and arousal occurred across a continuum and varied in intensity. The optimal level of both relays to the most pleasurable of activities.⁵⁵ In sociobiological terms, there are a variety of routes into sensation seeking and deviance ranging from the genotype to the phenotype of an individual.⁵⁶ For example, evolutionary socio-biologists argue that the genetic makeup of humans can trigger inherent elements of deviance⁵⁷ and there is a

⁵¹ Kay Dimmock, “Finding comfort in adventure: experiences of recreational SCUBA divers,” *Leisure Studies* 28, no. 3 (2009).

⁵² Holly Thorpe and Belinda Wheaton, “‘Generation X Games’, action sports and the olympic movement: understanding the cultural politics of incorporation,” *Sociology* 45, no. 5 (2011).

⁵³ Belinda Wheaton, *Understanding lifestyle sport: Consumption, identity and difference* (Routledge, 2004). 2

⁵⁴ Stephen Lyng, *Edgework: The sociology of risk-taking* (Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁵ Donald O Hebb, “Drives and the CNS (conceptual nervous system),” *Brian Physiology and Psychology* (1966); Marvin Zuckerman, *Sensation seeking (psychology revivals): Beyond the optimal level of arousal* (Psychology Press, 2014).

⁵⁶ Stuart Henry, *Social deviance* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

⁵⁷ Lee Ellis and Anthony Walsh, “Gene-based evolutionary theories in criminology,” *Criminology* 35, no. 2 (1997).

relationship between dopamine and endorphin levels and deviant behaviour where people become excited and experience an opiate-like high.⁵⁸ In particular, individuals with depressed levels of dopamine engage in super challenging or intensely stimulating activities in an attempt to increase their arousal at healthy levels; therefore sensation seekers are expected to demonstrate higher levels of deviance than those with normal sensitivity to environmental stimulation.

From a sociological perspective, Durkheim⁵⁹ argues that deviance shocks the collective consciousness producing moral outrage⁶⁰ suggesting that it concerns that which is not deviant. At the same time, though, deviance also titillates and satisfies. What is critical is the exercise of limited, rational, free choice. Choices take shape by the environment and the context in which individuals find themselves and how these fit in the individual's biography as they accumulate experiences and reflect on the meaning and context of their life.

However, we should not just dismiss this as just dangerous pursuits for individuals who choose to take these risks. There are tourism commodities that put the lives of tourists, and others at risk as illustrated by the increasing commodification of Mount Everest and conquering this peak. Everest over the years has become a very prominent feature on the bucket list of many aspiring climbers willing to test themselves against the elements and push themselves to the limit. At surface level, this appears a legitimate aspiration and a worthwhile pursuit that underlines an individual's bravery and commitment to their goals as it requires sacrifice and self-discipline. In some cases, it could even cost someone their life. Putting aside the ethical discussion on somatic rights, what makes climbing Mount Everest a contested tourism commodity is that inexperienced individuals keen on attaining their goal are putting the lives of others at risk as well.

The sheer magnitude of the task and its halo effect has attracted increasing numbers of climbers that are not of the same ability. Some climbers that take to the slope are inexperienced and thus pose a direct threat to themselves and other climbers. Some times, this inexperience can be a decisive factor in the death of many climbers⁶¹. Companies that take tourists

⁵⁸ Jane Stewart, "Pathways to relapse: the neurobiology of drug-and stress-induced relapse to drug-taking," *Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience* 25, no. 2 (2000).

⁵⁹ E Durkheim, *The division of labour in society*, trans. G. Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1933).

⁶⁰ A.B. Hendershott, *The politics of deviance* (Encounter Books, 2002). 11-17

⁶¹ Sue Tempest, Ken Starkey, and Christine Ennew, "In the Death Zone: A study of limits in the 1996 Mount Everest disaster," *Human Relations* 60, no. 7 (2007).

to the mountain face criticism for tolerating people who then become a liability. In his 1997 book 'Into thin air,' John Krakauer describes from first-hand experience how inexperienced climbers cost the lives of other more experienced climbers and guides⁶². The sheer number of people that tried to reach the summit on that day in 1996 was the chief contributing factor to the disaster along with the lousy weather that exposed the limits of the companies' marketing strategy.

Should the industry allow inexperienced climbers the opportunity to pursue their (costly) dream at the potential cost of their life, but also the lives of others? Should we protect people from themselves? At the same time, if only experienced climbers are allowed the climb, where does this leave the industry? What will happen to all the people who make a living of the climbing industry, if their market significantly shrinks in size?

There is no easy answer to offer- and this is a critical theme in this book. In the context of this volume, we cover other edgy and deviant tourist activities in different chapters. Whether tourists are participating in trophy hunting, visiting extreme haunts, seeking sexual thrills, or trusting strangers, risky/dangerous activities are inexorably linked with sensation seeking, stimulation and levels of arousal. These pursuits are not for everyone, but at least a small part of us wishes they were. Not because we are deviants, but because we are human, and we like to play, and this playfulness is central to the understanding of tourism and how tourists see themselves, their life and their tourist role.

In his famous parable in philosophy commonly known as the 'Allegory of the cave,' Plato describes prisoners living in a cave unaware of the outside world or reality surrounding them. All they can see are the shadows projected onto the cave walls by fire, constructing what they know as 'reality.' However, one day, an individual makes it out of the cave and discovers the real world. He returns to the cave to share with the other prisoners; however, in disbelief and frustrated, they plot to kill him. These prisoners were content with what they had accepted as 'reality,' that is all they had ever known. How can you miss or crave something you have not experienced or do not know about?

A more recent example comes from "The Matrix" film trilogy, where the hero, Neo, is confronted with the choice of two pills, blue and red. The blue represents a rejection of reality and continuing with ordinary

⁶² Jon Krakauer, *Into thin air: A personal account of the Mount Everest disaster* (Anchor, 2009).

and routine life, whereas, the red means change and facing the truth of existence. Both the parable of the cave and the Matrix mythology illustrate that it takes courage and something to change (a glitch to the matrix) to force people to face reality and seek something more meaningful. The problem, as we are going to see in this book is that this feeling of alienation is inescapable. What if there are caves inside caves? An infinite number of small prisons of routine, and mainstream that just leads to another prison of routine and mainstream? Even the most extreme niche form of tourism is inevitably bound to become standardised, routinised, and in due time alienating. This book traces the development and success of tourism niches. These niches have been carefully selected because each one of them illustrates something different about the tourism game- because that is all that it is.

Overall, this short section is a primer for the chapters that follow. The primary learning points from this discussion then, are as follows: Tourism is dynamic and unpredictable; individuals find an outlet through tourism to express themselves- hidden or front selves, and the expression of one's identity could be to some extent translated into tourism dollars. Also, tourists to themselves or others can be many different things at different times and settings. From hero to villain, from devil to saint, the tourist has many faces, and the market appears to have an excellent grasp of this, and it strives to provide a mask for each face by providing a stage for each tourist actor. Sometimes, this staging includes the commodification of good, services, ideas that perhaps make us feel uncomfortable, and this is the focus of this book.