



# GIFTS OF TOURISM: INSIGHTS TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract:** Using empirical evidence from real-life accounts of the giving, receiving and consuming of tourism and leisure products as gifts, this paper examines the phenomenon of experience gift giving behavior. Although generic gift giving has an extensive literature expanding from the 1950s, there is a gap between consumer activity in experience gift consumption and academic understanding. The study findings show the constituent parts and processes of decision-making, gift exchange, and post-exchange, consumption and post-consumption. These concepts, whether new (for example, patterns of participation in consumption), adapted (for example, wrapping strategies) or absorbed (for example, impression management) from the gift giving literature, are drawn together as a Model of Experience Gift Giving Behavior. **Keywords:** gift giving, experience gifts, tourist behavior. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Cadeaux de tourisme: des aperçus sur le comportement du consommateur. Cet article examine le phénomène de faire des 'cadeaux d'expérience' à partir de témoignage empirique dérivé de comptes rendus de donner, de recevoir et de consommer des produits de tourisme et de loisirs en tant que cadeaux. Bien qu'il existe depuis les années 50 une littérature étendue au sujet générique de faire des cadeaux, il reste un écart entre l'activité du consommateur dans la consommation des cadeaux d'expérience et sa compréhension universitaire. Les résultats de l'étude montrent les éléments constitutifs et les processus de la prise des décisions, d'échange de cadeaux, de ce qui se passe après l'échange, de la consommation et de la post-consommation. Ces concepts pris de la littérature pertinente, qu'ils soient nouveaux (par exemple, les modes de participation à la consommation), adaptés (par exemple, des stratégies d'emballage) ou absorbés (par exemple, la gestion de l'impression), sont réunis sous forme de Modèle de Faire des Cadeaux d'Expérience. **Mots-clés:** faire cadeau, cadeaux d'expérience, comportement du touriste. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a discrepancy between the practice of giving, receiving and consuming gifts that are tourism and leisure experiences and an understanding of this phenomenon as evidenced in academic attention. There is historical precedence for experience gifts; travel has been exchanged as a gift, often by the elite, for many centuries. In today's developed countries, anecdotal, trade and magazine evidence (Anonymous 2005; Consumers Association 2002; Knight 2003) highlights the intangible experience as ensconced in the gift giving repertoire of many individuals. Indeed, there is even an 'experience

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industry' of specialist companies (United Kingdom examples include Virgin Experience Days, Activity Superstore, and Experience World) that package experiences from abseiling to zoo-keeping specifically for the gift buying market. In North America, tourism and leisure products a.k.a. the experience are a "hot gift category" for the future (Anonymous 2005:92). In reality, the designated 'experience industry' as elucidated above (see Mintel 2001) forms only the tip of the experience gift iceberg. The vast array of tourism, hospitality and leisure providers sell products that are used by purchasers as gifts to be consumed by a third party. However, only the more enlightened of these providers are proactive in the gift giving marketplace.

Curiously, this consumer activity has not been reflected in academic output; doubly surprising given the maturity of gift giving literature *per se*. Much of the knowledge of gift giving derives from the social sciences accumulated over half-a-century (e.g. Mauss 1954), yet amongst the many sub-topics (e.g. gender, cultural context, self-gifting, dark side of giving etcetera) the intangible gift has not been singled out for observation. By default, the generic understanding of gift giving behavior is rooted in the study of physical goods, and hence the discrepancy between such consumer behavior in society and its associated academic discourse. To date, the notion of gifts and gift giving in tourism has been confined to vacation souvenirs as gifts for others (see, for example, Kim and Littrell 2001), rather than to the experience itself as a gift from one party to another to express a personal relationship.

The purpose of this paper is to begin to close this gap between behavioral practice and academic understanding of tourism and leisure when conferred gift status through use of empirical evidence drawn from real-life accounts of the giving, receiving and consumption of experience gifts. It only considers experience gifts used within personal relationships; institutional or company-based gifts of tourism and leisure products are outside the scope of this study. Alongside the assessment of the constituent parts and processes, a model is proposed that expresses the blend of absorbed, adapted and new concepts to best advance the understanding of the phenomenon of experience gift giving behavior.

## TOURISM AND LEISURE AS GIFTS

Cheal (1987:153) defines a gift as a "ritual offering that is a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another". There is nothing within this definition that precludes the experience. Indeed, the occasional experience is cited in the datasets of some gift giving studies (e.g. Durgee and Seago 2001; Mick and DeMoss 1992; Rucker, Freitas and Kangas 1996; Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1995)—for example, a day at a health spa or tickets for a show on Broadway. However, any commentary is marginal to the thrust of the discussion and gives little illumination as to the nature of experience gifts or associated consumer behavior.

There are two principal parties to the giving, receiving and consumption of gifts, namely the donor (singular or plural) whose activities and behavior equate to giving, and the recipient (singular or plural) whose

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