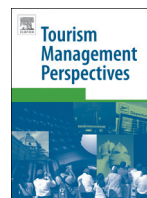




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The search for spirituality in tourism: Toward a conceptual framework for spiritual tourism

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ABSTRACT

The geo-psychological separation from the everyday that is embedded in spiritual travel practices, can be seen as a laboratory in which individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality in a way that is not always available in daily life. This feature of the tourism experience is arguably the reason for the popularity of spiritual tourism experiences among novices to spirituality-driven endeavours, as well as to those who wish to develop and deepen their ongoing transcendent engagement through and during travel. If spirituality is the goal, traveling seems like an ideal setting within which it can be sought and, sometimes, even found. This Special Issue has identified the emergence of a binary between spiritual tourism performance as intrinsically religious and conversely, as secular practice. Considering secular motivations firstly, it is clear that underlying the many specific drivers are deliberations focused on the self with motives like wellness, adventure or recreation predominant. Conversely, religious motivations for spiritual tourism largely leverage links to religion and are centred on specific drivers that are underlined by religious observance, ritualised practice, reaffirmation of identity and cultural performance.

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The white tourist who “does” the chief cities and historical sights and then steams away with disgust at the backward civilization of India is doubtless justified in his depreciation of it. Yet a wiser kind of tourist shall one day arise who will seek out, not the crumbling ruins of useless temples, nor the marbled palaces of dissipated kings long dead, but the living sages who can reveal a wisdom untaught by our universities.

[Paul Brunton, In a Search for Secret India]

1. Introduction

In light of broader transformations in the way people are searching for transcendence in life, travel has become an important practice in the emerging spiritual marketplace (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Paul Brunton, holds the mantle as one of the pioneers in the West in the quest to understand spiritualities in the East, and in embarking on his journeys, he critically explores the work of gurus, mystics and spiritual teachers among others to elucidate their wisdoms. First published in 1934, Brunton's spiritual voyage not only foresaw the emergence of

spirituality as a driver for tourism, and he in many ways inspired and paved the way for readers to expand their spiritual horizons while traveling. Brunton exemplifies what Roof (2001) defines as ‘reflexive spirituality’ best described as a cultural movement or a contemporary attitude toward spirituality that promotes the use of reason while exploring spiritualities. This reflexive and critical examination of spiritual paths is considered one of the hallmarks of the contemporary spiritual movement, and spiritual tourism is one of its manifestations (Besecke, 2014). The papers in this volume demonstrate that the geo-psychological separation from the everyday that is embedded in spiritual travel practices, can be seen as a laboratory in which individuals can examine, consider and practice spirituality, like Brunton did, in a way that is not always available in daily life.

Another way to comprehend the central role that travel plays in the contemporary spiritual movement is by focusing on its key characteristic – as a tempo-spatial interruption from daily routine. This feature of the tourism experience is arguably the reason for the popularity of spiritual tourism experiences among novices to spirituality-driven endeavours, as well as to those who wish to develop and deepen their ongoing transcendent engagement through and during travel. If spirituality is the goal, traveling seems like an ideal setting within which it can be sought and, sometimes, even found. If spirituality is a practice or an attitude of connectivity then, again, travel offers many opportunities to experience our renewed connection with others, with life in general

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and, most importantly, with ourselves. Either way, spiritual tourism appears to engage people on many levels that other forms of tourism only touch upon. As in the past, the debate about the distinction between a 'traveller' and a 'tourist' has preoccupied scholars, so now the numinous yet palpable distinction between a 'religious' and 'spiritual' tourist emerges.

The search for meaningful and spiritual experiences in the theorising of the tourist experience also goes far beyond the narrow window of religious and/or spiritual tourism. In his pioneering and celebrated theoretical model of the tourist experience, Cohen (1979) developed a typology of five modes of experiences which he anchors around the concept of the 'centre'. The centre in Cohen's conceptualisation is a cosmological metaphor for the core values around which every society is organised. In his model, tourism practices are viewed as conduits through which people can manage tensions with the centres that govern their home societies; therefore, they are powerful settings for meaning-making engagements.

In the same vein, Norman (2011, 2012), Fedele (2012), Robledo (2015) and Stausberg (2014) attempt to define the 'notoriously difficult' relationship between 'spirituality and religion' (Stausberg, 2014: 355). Stausberg (2014: 355) argues that spirituality is 'semantically' located 'both within and beyond' religion as it has the same inward direction but it also strives to distance itself from religion. This desire to distance oneself from traditional religiosity among modern spiritual pilgrims is apparent in the new typologies for spiritual travel, notably by Norman (2011, 2012) and Robledo (2015), as well as in the number of ethnographic studies of spiritual pilgrims themselves. Fedele (2012), for example, in referring to the growing spiritual tourism traveller, coins the term 'new pilgrims' – that is, spiritual tourists who visit traditional shrines for reasons unlike those of traditional religious pilgrims. Others refer to this as 'unchurching' (Wood, 2007), as 'discursive shifts' (Fedele, 2012; Kujawa, 2012) or 'subjective turns' (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) from religion to a broadly defined spirituality.

The precursor for formal recognition of spiritual tourism as a category or genre of tourism was the inaugural and so far only United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) summit on the topic at Ninh Binh City, Vietnam in November 2013. The conference was titled *Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development* outlining a specific focus on the contributions that it can make to the sustainable development of its various communities including both hosts and guests. This all-encompassing approach moved beyond secular or religious demarcations emphasising that "the cultural exchange and dialogue evoked by spiritual tourism are the very cornerstones of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect, the fundamental building blocks of sustainability" (UNWTO, 2013: 2). The UNWTO's utilitarian stance on spiritual tourism is unsurprising given the acknowledged potential that tourism in general is seen to have, especially in countries of the Global South. The unambiguous view put forward is that "the responsible and sustainable use of natural and cultural assets in the development of spiritual tourism can create employment opportunities, generate income, alleviate poverty, curb rural flight migration, prompt product diversification, and nurture a sense of pride among communities and destinations" (UNWTO, 2013: 2).

Our own journey in creating this volume was sparked by a symposium on spiritual tourism in November 2015, initiated and organised by Joseph Cheer at Monash University located in Melbourne Australia. This was conducted in conjunction with practitioners, World Weavers, an Australia-based organisation offering so called 'Adventures of the Spirit' including the unprecedented Monk for a Month experience – a 24 day spiritual adventure at a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastery in India's Spiti Valley. The debates and ideas expounded on and discussed incited our curiosity, and we conceived of creating a Special Issue on this subject matter for *Tourism Management Perspectives*. We are thankful to Chris Ryan for his trust and cooperation in enabling this venture. As is often the case with academic initiatives that involve multiple contributors across the globe, the final result is not necessarily

what we had envisaged at the beginning, and we have ended up with an eclectic and geographically diverse outcome that illuminates the multifaceted manifestations and iterations of spirituality and tourism in contemporary society.

2. Epistemic reflections on the special issue

Editing this Special Issues was a journey that started immediately after the symposium on spiritual tourism held at Monash. In order to share with our readers the essence of this process we have chosen to open this special issue with a dialogue between Ben Bowler, CEO of World Weavers and Yaniv Belhassen, a keynote speaker at the original symposium. The dialogue is entitled "*A Conversation about Spirituality and Tourism: Theory and Practice in Dialogue*." It provides an unusual academic stage to discuss theoretical and practical issues related to the spiritual tourism phenomenon. The non-mediated dialogue demonstrates the applicability and relevancy of Roof's reflexive spirituality (2001) among spiritual tourism entrepreneurs, and we believe it exemplifies an authentic and representative voice of this growing market.

Joanna Kujawa's work, "*Spiritual Travel as a Quest*," provides an analysis of the spiritual travel memoir genre, ranging from her own spiritual tourist experiences in Jerusalem and analogous to Paul Brunton's search for spiritual enlightenment in India and to what can be regarded as the new-age spirituality of Elizabeth Gilbert's (2009) *Eat, Pray, Love*. This paper leverages Kujawa's longstanding interest in spirituality and her 2012 best-selling book *Jerusalem Diary: Searching for the Tomb and House of Jesus*. In this book, Kujawa articulates a true story of a journey in search of Jesus' house in Nazareth and his tomb in Jerusalem – spiritual tourism personified. Kujawa argues that spiritual travel memoirs as well as recent ethnographic studies point to a significant discursive shift from religiosity to spirituality and the demarcation between spiritual experiences versus religious experiences, and spiritual tourism versus religious tourism. This decisive delineation between 'spiritual' and 'religious', Kujawa argues, opens a new door for both the conceptualisation and management of spiritual tourism.

In the next contribution, "*Spiritual Tourism at Meditation Retreats: Reflexive and Reflective Well-Being Interventions*," Alex Norman and Jennifer Pokorny outline a wider perspective on Buddhist meditation retreat practices in the West. They highlight the social dimensions of well-being that characterise the Buddhist retreat segment often localised in community or permanent centres in the West. The contribution of the paper to spiritual tourism lies in pointing out the new motivational themes in the field, such as a growing interest among 'Western Buddhist traditions' in meditation retreats for the purpose of personal well-being as a part of a larger wellness revolution in the West. Notably, Norman is one of the pioneers in the development of spiritual tourism in the academic community with his 2011 book *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* having paved the way for this Special Issue.

Hana Bowers and Joseph Cheer take a similar approach in the following paper: "*Yoga Tourism: Commodification and Western Embrace of Eastern Spiritual Practice*." Bowers and Cheer provide an inductive analysis of Yoga retreats in India, while emphasising how body and spirit interact in the tourist motivation. In many ways, yoga offers its followers a gateway to spiritual practice. Indeed Bowers and Cheer argue that the practice of yoga has become largely alien from its genesis steeped in spirituality and meditation, and in a contemporary sense has become highly fashionable. Just as Norman and Pokorny looked at the growing interest in meditation retreats among Western Buddhists, Bowers and Cheer's focus was on spiritual tourism to India – more specifically yoga-related travel by Western practitioners. However, unlike Norman and Pokorny, Bowers and Cheers differentiate yoga tourism from wellness tourism, and focus on the commodification of the original yoga philosophy to accommodate Western practitioners and consumers. Bowers and Cheer assert that in the process of yoga's commodification, the original gatekeepers or custodians of yoga in the Indian

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