

# Tourist Experience

Contemporary perspectives

*Edited by*

**Richard Sharpley and  
Philip R. Stone**



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# Introduction: thinking about the tourist experience

*Richard Sharpley and  
Philip R. Stone*

In his now classic *Jupiter's Travels*, Ted Simon reflects upon

the fascination with which I watch myself come closer and closer to merge with the world around me, dipping first a toe, then a foot, then a limb. Although I am made of the same stuff as the world, it used to seem that I might as well have been born on an asteroid, so awkward and unnatural was my place in the scheme of things... Then began a long apprenticeship, to become something certain in my own right, from which to see and be seen... to confirm that the world and I were, after all, made for each other.

(Simon 1979: 176)

Like innumerable others before him and since, Simon is writing about a journey. More specifically, he is writing about a four-year trip around the world on a motorbike (named 'Jupiter'), vividly describing the places he visits and passes through, the people he meets, and his adventures (and disasters) related to his mode of transport. Significantly, he also reflects at length on his personal experiences: his relationships with the people, places and cultures he encounters, the purpose of his journey and, in particular, his own life and how it has been transformed by his travels. Thus, his book is, in a sense, a story of two journeys: the physical trip through time and space, with an identifiable beginning and end; and a personal, spiritual journey of discovery and transformation extending beyond the temporal boundaries of the actual trip.

Interestingly, over 25 years later and at the age of 69, Ted Simon recreated or, maybe, attempted to relive the original journey by embarking on another global motorbike ride that was to last two years. Implicit in his subsequent account (Simon 2007) is his disappointment that not only had many of the places he originally travelled through changed dramatically, challenging his remembered experiences of them, but also that he too had changed, that perhaps the world and he were, in fact, no longer 'made for each other'. Ironically, the meaning of his travels had in some way been transformed, from a voyage of discovery into a nostalgic journey into the past, something that he accepts in the title of that account: *Dreaming of Jupiter*.

Nevertheless, Simon's books together are, on the one hand, just one example of a genre of writing that has existed for almost as long as people have had the means or ability to engage in travel (Robinson and Andersen 2002). Since Herodotus, the fifth-century BC Greek historian, wrote about his extensive travels – and is thus widely considered to be the first 'travel writer' – innumerable travellers (or tourists?) have written about their experiences, in so doing undoubtedly inspiring countless others to follow in their footsteps or, in Simon's case, tyre-tracks (see, for example, McGregor and Boorman 2005).

On the other hand, they are also, along with much other travel writing, populist or journalistic evidence of what has long been recognised and considered within the academic study of tourism: that to consume tourism is to consume experiences; moreover, that tourist experiences are not uniform, even within specific contexts and places. Whether on extended overland adventures as described in much travel writing or on a more 'typical' one- or two-week holiday (though there is, perhaps, no longer a 'typical' holiday), the tourist experience is unique to the individual tourist. The personal significance of tourism or holidays is largely defined by an individual tourist's own socio-cultural world – as Urry (1990a: 23) observes, 'explaining the consumption of tourist services cannot be separated off from the social relations in which they are embedded' – and that social world is dynamic and continually evolving. Equally, the ways in which tourists interact with destination environments, cultures and communities is very much determined by their own 'cultural baggage'; their perceptions, values, experience, knowledge, attitudes, and so on. It is often said that, by going away on holiday, you can escape from those around you but you cannot escape from yourself. The implication is, therefore, that there are as many tourist experiences as there are tourists, each experience defined by the individual tourist, the 'social fabric that surrounds them' (Ryan 1997a: 1) and their consequential relationship with the destination. Hence, understanding the nature of the tourist experience would seem to be a difficult, if not impossible task.

Nevertheless, tourism as a social phenomenon, involving the movement of millions of people both across international borders and within their own countries, cannot be understood without knowledge and explanation of the meaning or significance of tourism to tourists themselves, of their interactions with the sites, attractions, events and people they encounter, and of the multitude of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the nature and outcomes of those interactions. In short, fundamental to the study of tourism is the study of the tourist experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that attention has long been paid to it in the tourism literature from a variety of now well-known 'micro' perspectives familiar to anyone concerned with the study of tourism, such as tourism demand factors, tourist motivation, typologies of tourists and issues related to authenticity, commodification, image and perception. At the same time, equally well-known seminal works, such

as those by Cohen (1979a), MacCannell (1976) and Urry (1990a; 2002), have proposed broader meta-theories of how tourist experiences are framed or constructed by the social world of the tourist.

We shall return to these shortly, suggesting in particular that the need exists for more focused research into tourist experiences that reflect their ever-increasing diversity and complexity and their significance and meaning to tourists, hence the collection of contemporary studies presented in this book. First, however, it is useful to consider two questions relevant to the study of tourist experiences: what do we actually mean by the term 'the tourist experience'; and, what influence, if any, has the increasing social institutionalisation and, in particular, what might be described as the 'consumerisation' of tourism had on the nature of that tourist experience?

The former is, at first sight, relatively easy to answer; the tourist experience is, by definition, what people experience as tourists. However, a distinction must immediately be made between the specific services (often referred to as experiences) consumed by tourists within the context of a temporally defined holiday or period away from home, and the broader experience (*the* tourist experience) that they collectively contribute to. Tourist services/experiences may be thought of as those that are produced or provided by the myriad businesses, organisations and individuals that comprise the tourism sector; they are, in a sense, commoditised experiences that meet an immediate need (a meal, a flight on an aeroplane, accommodation, entertainment, etc.) and hopefully bring immediate but short-term satisfaction or benefits. *The* tourism experience, conversely, is the experience of being a tourist, which results not only from a particular combination of provided experiences, but also from the meaning or significance accorded to it by the tourist in relation to his or her normal socio-cultural existence (most usually considered in terms of the experience of difference, novelty or the 'Other'), and which may be mediated by characteristics of the destination.

Implicitly, therefore, the tourism experience brings longer lasting benefits or rewards to the tourist, perhaps fulfilling socially determined needs or objectives; for if it does not, what logic would there be in continuing to seek the tourist experience? Of course, logic might not be a defining element of the consumption of tourism – tourism has long been described as irrational behaviour corresponding to a 'lemming effect' (Emery 1981) – but, nevertheless, the tourist experience is, in effect, the significance of engaging in tourism. However, this immediately begs the question, when is one a tourist and not a tourist? Particular forms of tourism, such as a short-break or a two-week holiday, are temporally defined, yet the meaning or benefits of these commence with anticipation and continue with memories, which subsequently feed back into anticipating the subsequent period of tourism consumption. Thus, the tourist experience may be continual (particularly if one agrees with Urry's (1994) assertion that, from a postmodern perspective, most people are tourists most of the time, though defined in relation to their dynamic social existence in general and by their maturation as tourists – or



by their ascent of the 'travel career ladder' (Pearce 2005) – in particular. In this sense, the tourist experience then becomes not an experience determined by and distinct from the tourist's normal socio-cultural life but, rather, one element of it. Indeed, whilst this has undoubtedly long been the case for 'professional' tourists, such as Ted Simon, whose life, living and identity has been largely determined by his travel experiences, the same may now be said for tourists more generally.

This latter point relates to the second question above, namely, the extent to which the institutionalisation and consumerisation of tourism together have influenced the nature of the tourist experience. By institutionalisation, we mean that tourism has evolved, at least in western, developed nations, into a social institution; it has become an accepted, expected, 'democratised' (Urry 1990b), socially-sanctioned feature of contemporary social life, to the extent that to voluntarily exclude oneself from participation in tourism of any kind might be thought of as unusual behaviour. For example, a number of (non-academic) surveys in the UK have revealed that some tourists admit to not finding their annual summer-sun vacation a pleasurable experience, yet they continue to book their holidays year after year, perhaps finding it easier to endure the holiday than to explain why they would prefer to stay at home! Consumerisation, conversely, is used here as a term to describe the way in which tourism, along with other leisure activities, has come to be defined by commercial production and consumption; that is, where once leisure was active, simple and reflective, based upon an individual's intelligence, imagination and wit, there has been a move, according to Ramsay (2005: 31), 'towards fun and fashion, pampering rather than developing, lifestyle rather than living, buying into activities that are more isolating, though easily repeatable. In short, we have commodified leisure'.

Referring to tourism in particular, Ramsay goes on to cite John Carroll who, in his book *Ego and Soul: The Modern West in Search of Meaning* (Carroll 1998) describes contemporary tourism as the 'greatest and most successful lie of western, consumerist culture' (Ramsay 2005:102). By this, he suggests that tourists, through buying the annual summer holiday, believe they are purchasing a ticket to authentic encounters with people and places, to freedom from responsibility, from the consumerist realities of the everyday. In reality, according to Carroll, both tourists and the tourism industry are collaborating in a hoax where 'tourists persuade themselves that they are heroic and happy while in fact clinging to the few traces of the everyday which the holiday package allows them' (Ramsay 2005: 102). Far from escaping a consumerist routine, tourists are simply purchasing the opportunity to continue that routine elsewhere and, as a consequence, achieve instantaneous, short-lived consumption-based rewards, but are unlikely to benefit from reflective, developmental or meaningful experiences that are often claimed to be the purpose or outcomes of participating in tourism.

Taken together, the institutionalisation and consumerisation of tourism might suggest that tourists have largely become passive participants, encouraged