



Paranormal tourism: Assessing tourists' onsite experiences

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ABSTRACT

Paranormal tourism is one of the new forms of special interest tourism. It is defined by tourists' interests in topics which challenge realist ontologies and representational epistemologies. The aims of this study were to outline the facets of tourists' experiences when visiting key sites of paranormal interest in Bali, Indonesia. The work also assessed the way context influences tourists' paranormal experiences. The researchers used the conceptual framework of the Orchestra Model of tourists' experiences to inform this work. Highlights from the comprehensive descriptive assessment include high levels of emotional excitement, joy, and surprise, some specific visual sensations, as well as instances of noteworthy sounds, smells, and tastes. Different settings (ghost versus spiritual sites) affect the tourists' onsite reactions. This foundation study on paranormal tourism contributes to an understanding of the emerging area of paranormal tourism. Through understanding tourists' experiences, this study also offers directions for tourism marketing of relevant destinations.

1. Introduction

Paranormal phenomena and activities have achieved some prominence around the world. Paranormal topics often capture people's attention through media reports, social media postings, and television programs. There are many popular sites of interest and paranormal activities reported in different parts of the world. For example, in the United States, the Sallie House in Atchison, Kansas has been a haunted house and ghost attack site since 1993, or the Myrtles Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana, a mansion famous for its mystic and fascinating history (Bloomberg Business, 2015). Examples in the United Kingdom and Europe include the Ancient Ram Inn in England, cited the most haunted building in the country, or the Mary King's Close, a mystic and gripping close buried underground in Scotland (Daily Mail Australia, 2016; Trip Advisor, 2018). Another popular site is the Hell Fire Club in Montpellier Hill in Northern Ireland, a haunted ruin building and site of speculated supernatural events. Equally popular are the Paris Catacombs in France, which consist of an old cave lined with remains and bones of the dead, or the Moosham Castle, a place that ended witchcraft in 18th century in Austria (Association for Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena, 2013; Daily Telegraph, 2015; Trip Advisor, 2017).

In Africa, key sites include the Castle of Good Hope, Smuts House in Pretoria, Nottingham Road Hotel in Kwa Zulu Natal, and Rudd House in Kimberley (Obiwulu, 2016). In Australia, paranormal elements are recognised as parts of the attraction for ghost and investigative tours.

Examples include the Monte Cristo Homestead, Studley Park House, Beechwood Lunatic Asylum, Casular, or the Min Lights. Sites of paranormal interest are also prominent in Asia (Irwin, 2009). These Asian destinations offer diverse settings and stories. Following this widespread interest, paranormal tourism has emerged as a new form of special interest tourism. However, there is only limited empirical data in the academic literature related to paranormal tourism. There is clearly an opportunity for tourism researchers to enhance and build on the existing knowledge base.

This foundation research focuses on Asian destinations, in particular the paranormal sites in Bali, Indonesia. In Asian culture, beliefs in paranormal phenomena reflect a fundamental need to have a sense of control over one's everyday life (Irwin, 2009). The belief in the existence of ghosts or spirits is widespread in many Asian countries. It is common for ghosts to be characterised as malleable entities, and they can be appeased through rituals, or angered if provoked (The Atlantic, 2014). Such paranormal beliefs are particularly strong in Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Indonesia.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers selected Bali, as it is a prominent international tourist destination. The island is not only recognised for its beautiful countryside, its beaches, and cultural attractions, but also provides a suitable venue to study the topic of paranormal tourism (Bali-Indonesia, 2016). The number of tourist arrivals in Bali has increased from over two million foreign visitors in 2008 to nearly five million in 2016 (Bali Government Tourism Office, 2017). These figures reflect an interest in many forms of tourism, including

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niche and special topics. In the increasing diversity of types of tourism, paranormal activities are now a part of Balinese tourism (Haynes, 2016). There are several popular paranormal activities and sites of interest in Bali, such as the ghost town of the Taman Festival Bali, the Trunyan Cemetery, the Lost Places, the 'Haunted Hotel' of Bedugul, the Ghost Palace Hotel, and the abandoned wreck of Padang (Trip Canvas, 2014). Other sites feature black magic, rituals, and ghosts (Hsh-Stay, 2016).

Researching tourists' on-site experiences is one avenue to exploring niche tourism topics. Several authors report that positive and rewarding tourist experiences stem from interesting and well-managed tourist sites (Bowen & Clarke, 2009; Pearce, 2005). As a niche topic, paranormal tourism can add to the image of the destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007; Otto & Ritchie, 1996). Tourists' motivations to visit a paranormal site can either stem from previous interest, or simply from a desire to experience something new (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Vogt & Andereck, 2003). With a view to building a comprehensive theoretical and conceptual framework, this study uses different kinds of settings to gain the best possible overview of tourist experiences at paranormal sites. We examined tourists' experiences at seven sites in Bali using the Orchestra Model. This research seeks to document the nature of paranormal tourism and aims to better define and understand tourists' reactions to paranormal settings. In time, it is hoped that the increasing interest in this topic will better assist the strategic management of paranormal tourism destinations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Paranormal tourism

Paranormal tourism has yet to be clearly defined as a special interest tourism topic. The term 'paranormal' has been defined as "a wide range of beliefs and experiences concerning religion, psi (clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, and psychokinesis), the occult, witchcraft, superstitions, the supernatural and extraordinary, and extra-terrestrial life forms" (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983, p. 1029). As a pivotal definition for this work, we propose that the explanation of paranormal tourism also demands the use of the term 'travelling'. Travelling to events or destinations is seen as a mandatory aspect for visitors to truly experience paranormal activities and phenomena.

In a more formal sense, tourists who are interested in paranormal topics also challenge realist ontologies and representational epistemologies. The paranormal concept can be seen as an expansion of the other related types of tourism, such as dark tourism (Sharpley & Stone, 2009), ghost tourism (Holzhauser, 2015), spiritual tourism (Jepson & Sharpley, 2011), religious tourism (Guelke & Olsen, 2004), and pilgrimage tourism (Štefko, Kírářová, & Mudrík, 2015). Fig. 1 shows an overlap of the relationships between the concept of ghost tourism, dark tourism, spiritual tourism, and pilgrimage tourism. Common forms of paranormal tourism include the components of ghost tourism or haunt jaunting, guided tours and investigative tours (Blankshein, 2012, p. 13). Special hotspots or sites of interest help locate and define this type of tourism (Travel Channel, 2015). These include looking for UFOs or mythical animals (e.g., Bigfoot, mythical serpent or Naga, Min Mins light), participating in ghost haunting tours, or travelling to destinations related to spiritual beliefs. According to this study, paranormal tourism refers to visiting places that embody belief systems beyond normal rational views. These intersecting elements can form sub-categories of paranormal tourism. The sites of interest include locations and experiences that provide an ontological challenge to conventional epistemology. Hence, this research is timely and of value, as it presents opportunities to document the nature of paranormal tourism and contribute to the understanding of this niche area of tourism. This in turn will better assist other destinations to manage the interest in paranormal tourism more strategically.

2.2. The Orchestra Model of tourists' experiences

Many discipline areas, such as sociology, business, psychology, and economics have informed the study of tourists' behaviour and experiences (Barenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004; Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010; Pearce & Packer, 2013; Schmitt, 2010). The different fields of academic interest offer selective insights into the complexity of appraising tourists' experiences. In tourism, dominant components that characterise the experience of tourists include cognitive and affective forces (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Cognitive in this context refers to knowledge and beliefs, while the term affective encompasses feelings, emotions, and moods (Bigné & Andreu, 2004; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Parkinson & Manstead, 2015; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993). How people think and feel also has a sensory quality that matters (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013; Pearce, 2012). One integrative model that incorporates these components is the Orchestra Model of tourists' on-site experiences (Pearce, 2011; Pearce, Wu, De Carlo, & Rossi, 2013). The authors developed the model to conceptualise and measure aspects of how tourists experience settings. The analogy to the performance of an orchestra stimulates the recognition that the total production of the experience fluctuates over time. Different contributions can also be made by constituent sectors. For analytical purposes, it is possible to research the role of anyone contributing to the sector.

In sum, the five components of the model are 1) sensory elements, 2) affective components, 3) cognitive elements, 4) behavioural components, and 5) relationships. The key idea of the model is a complete rendition of tourists' experience, best appreciated by recognising that all these elements can contribute the whole experiences in different ways. Some elements may be more dominant at any one time, and researchers can benefit by recognising the mutual interactions among the components. The model is pragmatic because each item is amenable to assessment. In a more theoretical sense, it aligns with a phenomenological view of experiences. As a primary orientation to interpreting experience, the model shows how an experience feels, or is felt by the participant in the moment (Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014; Pearce & Packer, 2013). The model is emic in orientation. It is particularly sensitive to the often neglected elements of 'sensory' and 'relationship' that influence and shape tourists' experiences (Agapito et al., 2013; Pearce, 2012). Table 1 provides more detail about the components.

In this study, the five components of the Orchestra Model of tourists' experiences are used to explore the composition of tourists' experiences when they are travelling to paranormal destinations. The researchers explore the multiple senses involved for paranormal tourists (sensory components), investigate the feelings and emotions of paranormal tourists (affective components), observe what tourists do onsite (behavioural components), identify the levels of information that tourists use, receive or remember (cognitive component), as well as defining with whom they travel (relationship component).

3. Tourist destinations and tourism contexts

Any tourism context is the complex combination of people's perceptions of activity, space, and time (Porja, Butler, & Airey, 2003). Particular touristic contexts may affect individual preferences. As noted previously, paranormal tourism has several sub-sets of activities and the organisation of these activities can vary. In ghost tourism, for example, tourists may join a ghost tour or ghost walk at sites such as a haunted house or hotel (Holloway, 2010). Paranormal tourists may also choose to visit a location of speculated Alien presence. Places that connect and communicate with the deceased like faith healing, telekinesis, extra-sensory perception, out of body experiences and monsters, could also be further topics of paranormal interest (Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Parker, 2012; Surmeli & Saka, 2011). At times, these interests may overlap or intersect with more recognised forms of travel motivation and interest. Those who seek to understand or seek out spirits may be accompanied by like-minded people with an interest in visiting sacred sites, temples,

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