

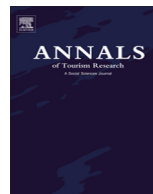


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The Inca Trail experience: Does the journey matter?

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ABSTRACT

Tourist experience research tends to focus on destinations rather than journeys, overlooking the role of mobility in tourism experiences and the need for mobile research methods. To address this gap, this research explores the experience of hiking the Inca Trail in Peru along with the experience of the destination of Machu Picchu. Immediate experiential reactions and memorable experiences are evaluated to better understand the significance of this tourist route. Results indicate that this mobile tourist experience holds meaning related to the perception of self-identity and the encounter of corporeal self. Experiences of pain and struggle emerge as a core theme of mobile tourist experiences and the implications of this are discussed.

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Introduction

Tourism involves movement. It is one of the few agreed upon elements in tourism definitions, yet the experience of movement receives little attention in the tourism literature. This movement is a phenomenon in its own right, involving the experience of dwelling in motion (Haldrup, 2004; Urry, 2007). The importance of this paper lies in its emphasis on mobile practices in tourism both in implementing a novel research design and in drawing attention to the relationship between mobile tourist experiences and the experience of self. In understanding tourist experiences, we need to investigate how the qualities of tourism practices and landscapes are involved in the (re)development of self-identity (Desforges, 2000). Peru's multi-day Inca Trail hike, ending at the Historical Sanctuary of Machu Picchu, presents an excellent opportunity to research the tourist experience of mobility and self due to its prominence as a mobile tourist space and because it combines the experience of a journey with the experience of a destination.

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In this paper, we start by discussing the literature on mobility in tourism and the tourist experience of self. This is followed by a description of the research methods used to capture immediate and recollected understandings of the Inca Trail and Machu Picchu experience. In the results section we present findings on immediate experiential reactions and memories of experiences. This leads to a discussion of how these findings relate to mobility and tourist experience research. The emphasis of the discussion section is on the experience of self, the experience of routes versus destinations, and the implications for tourist experience management. We conclude with how this study advances knowledge on mobile tourism experiences and what research is needed to further develop this topic area.

Mobility in tourism

In tourism research, the act of travel has historically been treated as a basic requirement involved in getting to or around a destination (Haldrup, 2004; Johnson, 2010; Urry, 2007). Treating travel time as a requirement, or as empty voids in itineraries, fails to recognise the impact of mobility on our understanding of identity, places, and lived experiences (Urry, 2007). Tourism does not simply happen in spots; it consists of movement through geographical space (Adler, 1989). The concentration on destinations as the site of experiences overlooks the practices of movement that are omnipresent in tourism.

Mobility in tourism is a spatialised way of encountering destinations. Tourists navigate, inhibit, and prescribe meaning to spaces based on multi-sensory experiences (Haldrup, 2004). A mobilities perspective in tourism research explores the practices that take place during movement (Johnson, 2010). This offers a way to explore the tourist experience of travel within tourism. There is a growing body of research on mobility in tourism (see Haldrup, 2004; Johnson, 2010; Spinney, 2011) and this study contributes to this by focusing on the earliest form of movement—walking.

On the subject of transportation, nothing predates walking (Siddall, 1987). For much of human history walking was the only way to travel over land. When quicker and more convenient forms of transportation started to appear (such as railways and automobiles), the act of walking was no longer a necessity for travel. This freed up walking to be a leisure choice for those interested in experiencing the landscape on foot (Siddall, 1987) or as put by Urry (2007, p. 79) “walking became a way of being and not simply a means of travel”. Walking can be a way to rediscover the senses, where the body is freed from everyday life to explore individuality and undertake self-development (Edensor, 2000). The act of walking can also connect us with history and culture. Arellano (2004) discusses the Inca Trail hike as a rite of passage, enabling tourists to revive and experience ‘real Incaness’.

Based on a review of literature on mobility in tourism, Haldrup (2004) argues that pleasure is experienced in the act of moving through space from practices such as sightseeing or hiking. The body experiences the world by moving and being within it and this worldly experience can shape self-perception. The understanding of self through walking practices is a theme eloquently discussed in other papers (see Adler, 1989; Edensor, 2000; Roberson & Babic, 2009; Wylie, 2005). Moving through and with landscapes can allow for self-reflection, self-reliance, and sensual experiences of place (Edensor, 2000; Urry, 2007; Wylie, 2005). However, this movement also evokes a sense of self through corporeal (bodily) experiences. Walking is a practice that draws attention to the physical self. The individual must use physical senses to navigate the landscape and avoid bodily harm (Wylie, 2005). This experience of the self within the practice of walking (or hiking) in a tourist setting is deserving of more research attention.

The tourist experience

The tourist experience is a complex phenomenon that involves an array of different psychological abilities associated with the experience of place. Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) work on experience economies discuss experiences as something that occurs within an individual who is engaged with an event on a physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual level. One interesting aspect of tourism experiences that has emerged is how these relate to or influence the understanding of self. This research adds to this line of inquiry by exploring the tourist experience of self in motion through identity (the perceived self) and corporeality (the tangible self).

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