



SEARCHING FOR JEWISH ANSWERS IN INDIAN RESORTS

The Postmodern Traveler

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Abstract: The paper aims to contribute to the debate concerning the analytical value of fixed categories and argues that the construction of such categories is problematic. It investigates aspects of what cannot be classified either as “pure” travel or as typical pilgrimage or religious tourism, and argues that these and other definitions are no longer suitable for examining a touristic experience we see as complex, full of contradictions, and—in other words—postmodern. We will adopt an emic perspective in order to learn about the tourists’ views and self-perception, abandoning the more etic approach that has usually been adopted in tourism study and research. **Keywords:** religious tourism, pilgrimage, existential tourism, backpacking, postmodern, India. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

It is argued (Cohen, 1991) that pilgrimage and tourism differ in terms of the direction of the journey undertaken—the pilgrim and the “pilgrim-tourist” peregrinate toward their sociocultural center and do not wish to replace it, while the traveler and the “traveler tourist” move in the opposite direction.

It is also argued that there is a relation between the degree of the tourist’s alienation and the depth of his/her touristic experience: the more alienated the tourist, the more he/she will want to change his/her elective center. Existential tourists are the most alienated from all tourists from their own society, are deeply committed to the new spiritual center they visit, and may attach themselves permanently to it. Conversely, recreational tourists have little interest in or desire for

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the authentic, pursue a light sun-sex-sea vacation, and do not seek an alternative to their elective center (Cohen, 1979).

According to these definitions, pilgrims are *not* existential tourists, as they are not alienated from their home country. Their aim is not to change their elective center, but rather to strengthen it. Neither can pilgrims be classified as travelers, since the direction of their travel is opposite. In fact, there is no accepted definition or term for a tourist who leads a very deep mode of travel and is neither a pilgrim nor an existential tourist.

In this article we argue that these and other definitions are no longer suitable for examining the touristic experience, which we believe has now become complex, full of contradictions and—in other words—post-modern. We will examine some “old” and fixed definitions and categories from tourism study and ask whether these can still be used today; are they still relevant, do tourists wish to use them, and are there any alternatives? We will adopt an emic perspective in order to learn about the tourists’ views and self-perception; a perspective which recognizes the fluidity of boundaries, while leaving behind the more etic approach that has usually been adopted in tourism study and research.

This study concentrates on the backpacking phenomenon, and specifically on Israeli backpackers in India who search for spiritual answers both in the local philosophies and also in their own elective center—Judaism. The paper will examine an eclectic kind of tourism which involves “going out there” while “staying here;” pursuing a light and fun mode of tourism while searching for existential answers; and showing interest in the local while being ultimately attracted to the old and familiar.

THE POSTMODERN TRAVELER

First, we will examine some “old” definitions that have been used extensively in tourism study and writing. These definitions may be applied to the tourists studied here, but none of them provides a full description. The use of these definitions regarding the tourists studied will be based on an emic approach, rather than an etic one. None of the terms fit the tourists studied to the full, and they certainly do not fit their own descriptions of themselves. Previous publications by the authors and others have employed these terms in order to describe similar modes of travel (see for example Cohen, 1991; Maoz, 2006b; Noy & Cohen, 2005). However, the time has come to suggest a new perspective that relies on the researched themselves, and to acknowledge that some categories and terms are now outmoded and irrelevant.

Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage

Religious tourism is oriented around the motivations of the tourists—which are partially or exclusively religious ones. It usually includes religious ceremonies, festivals, sacred places and shrines, and conferences. In many cases, ceremonies and commemoration days dictate

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