



The summer of the Spirits: Spiritual tourism to America's foremost village of spirit mediums



Andrew Singleton*

Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The historic Spiritualist village of Lily Dale, New York, is a popular summer tourist destination in America, attracting approximately 20,000 visitors per year. This research argues that many of these visitors are “spiritual seekers”. Spiritual seeking is an important movement in the west. To date, however, there has been insufficient attention paid to the specific places in which this spiritual questing is undertaken. This research uses the concept of spiritual tourism to understand the summer journey to this part of America. Drawing on a range of ethnographic data, it finds that affective destinations play an irreducible part of many people's spiritual lives; it may only be through travel to dedicated places that seekers' aspirations can be fully realized.

Introduction

It is a balmy summer afternoon in Lily Dale, a small village in western New York State. Hundreds of people amble slowly along a gravel path leading from the village to nearby Leolyn Wood. In the heart of this old-growth wood is a clearing, and an outdoor chapel. This space is called Inspiration Stump, named after an old tree stump in the middle of the clearing. In front of the stump are rows of bench seating. People are coming here to receive messages from the spirits of the deceased. The audience settles into their seats, chat to those nearby and wait for proceedings to begin. What follows is a Spiritualist message service, provided by Lily Dale's resident mediums. Once the service leader lays down a few rules, mediums take turns channeling messages from those who have “passed over” to the “other side.” The Spiritualist mediums at Lily Dale call this “serving spirit.” Spiritualism is an American-founded modern religion, and Lily Dale, home to about 40 registered mediums, is its modern-day epicenter (Richard & Adato, 1980; Singleton, 2014; Wicker, 2003).

For about an hour, messages from deceased family and friends are channeled by the mediums to selected members of the audience. The medium will say something like: “I have been speaking to a little lady [in spirit]. She may be medium height, more on the thin side, I feel there was some kind of mental illness with her ... I have the connecting name of Hazel. I am also aware of the name of Mary ... [can] anyone [take this message]?” (Author's field notes.) Almost invariably, someone identifies a message like this as coming from a dead relative or friend. The medium will then channel messages for a further minute or two. Those who receive messages typically affirm what the medium has said by nodding their heads, or by offering a few words of thanks. It is respectful and quiet. No one challenges the veracity of what is being said. At the conclusion of the service, people come and stand at the stump while others drift back towards the village, with its gift shop, cafes, library, and museum. A few who have received messages stay behind; some sob quietly and are consoled by companions. The message service at Inspiration Stump runs twice a day, and is one of many spiritual activities drawing thousands of tourists every summer at Lily Dale. In addition to the mediumship, there is a large program of spiritually focused activities and workshops on offer from July through August.

* Address: School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia.

E-mail address: Andrew.Singleton@deakin.edu.au.

The “summer season” at Lily Dale has run for well over a century, and the official website claims it attracts more than 20,000 visitors each time (Lily Dale Assembly). The town has been the subject of numerous articles in the popular press and several documentaries, including the well-known HBO film *No One Dies in Lily Dale* (2010). There has also been some earlier research on its visitors (Richard & Adato, 1980). Notwithstanding Lily Dale’s rich Spiritualist heritage, however, most of those who visit now are not committed followers of the Spiritualist religion. The village is proving attractive to a new kind of visitor, emblematic of recent shifts in America’s religious landscape. These tourists are “spiritual seekers,” pursuing a self-directed quest for spiritual knowledge or enlightenment outside the bounds of organized religion.

Drawing on a range of ethnographic data, including formal interviews, participant observation, and historical material, this research explores people’s motivations for making the summer journey to this part of America. To understand these motivations, it deploys the emerging concept of “spiritual tourism.” Spiritual tourists are visitors who largely inhabit what Cohen (1979) describes as the “experimental” and “existential” modes of contemporary tourism: a trip is undertaken to achieve spiritual growth, and is not just a diversion from the everyday. While there has been extensive study into both religious pilgrimage and religious tourism in recent decades, spiritual tourism of the kind described here has only recently been the subject of research (Norman, 2011; Smith, 2003; Timothy & Olsen, 2006a).

I contend that this mode of tourism reflects a societal shift in which people are increasingly seeking personal meaning outside of the religious traditions that have defined western societies (Singleton, 2014, 2016). Travel to places like Lily Dale can meet such needs; it may only be through a visit that seekers’ spiritual aspirations can be fully realized. Importantly, this research argues that while the concept of spiritual tourism is broadly useful for describing the intersection between travel and “non-churched” spiritualities, any empirical investigation of the phenomenon should pay attention to the features of a destination and how this intersects with travelers’ various motivations. In doing so, it advocates for a more nuanced, context-specific way of understanding the terrain of contemporary global spiritual tourism.

To begin, I describe the evolution of Lily Dale’s summer season and how it has become a popular and socially significant summer destination. I then outline the dimensions of spiritual tourism; how it involves both spiritual destinations and distinctive types of seeker-tourists. Discussion then turns to the methods used in this research. Next, I examine the motivations of the tourists, and inductively propose a typology of four different classes of tourist to Lily Dale, based around their engagement with Lily Dale’s diverse offerings. While each type has a particular motivation for travel, the abiding theme for three of these types is that a visit to the village will contribute to some kind of personal self-discovery, change or development based on the services and experiences found there.

Lily Dale, spiritualism and the contemporary summer season

Prior to describing the literature on spiritual tourism, this section examines Lily Dale’s evolution from annual Spiritualist summer camp to a place of diverse spiritual possibilities. This sets the scene for the subsequent investigation of its present-day visitors.

The village of Lily Dale is a gated community of a few hundred people, most of whom are Spiritualists, located approximately 60 miles south of Buffalo in western New York. It is situated on upper Cassadaga Lake and surrounded by forest and farmland. Many of its buildings are of the late Victorian era, decorated in a style befitting that time. In addition to houses, there is a three-story hotel, the Marplewood, and several communal buildings, including a museum and library devoted to Spiritualism. A sign at the gate declares Lily Dale is “The world’s largest center for the religion of Spiritualism,” a claim given weight by the fact the headquarters of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC), a peak body of American Spiritualist churches, is situated on the grounds.

The religion of Spiritualism emerged in upstate New York in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a very popular social movement in the United States until the early twentieth century and in Britain and Australia until after the First World War, and still claims a reasonable number of committed followers in the present day, particularly in America (Singleton, 2014, p. 22). Its influence has extended far beyond the movement itself. Today, many people believe in psychic possibilities or consult with mediums. The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, representative of the American adult population, found that 21 percent of Americans strongly agree or agree that it is possible to contact the dead, while 12 percent have consulted a psychic, medium or fortune-teller (Bader, Mencken, & Baker, 2011, p. 73).

Founded in 1879, Lily Dale was at first a summer camp for followers of the rapidly growing Spiritualist movement. Around the 1880s the camp began to have year-round residents and the village was slowly established. Today, those who wish to have a home on the grounds must be members of the Lily Dale Assembly (which in turn requires membership of a recognized Spiritualist church) (Lily Dale Assembly).

At present, approximately 40 registered, professional mediums maintain homes in Lily Dale. Registered mediums must pass a series of test readings in order to secure registration. These mediums are available for private consultation year-round, but are busiest during the summer season and are regularly booked out. During the summer season they also “serve spirit” at Inspiration Stump and the Forest Temple (another outdoor venue with bench seating).

In its early years, the summer season at Lily Dale consisted of lectures, séances, mediumship training, and private and platform readings (message services), all for the “promulgation of Spiritualism” (Nagy & LaJude, 2010, p.63). Today, members of the Assembly host the message services at Inspiration Stump, healing services, and a traditional Sunday Spiritualist service. Visitors can call in on the library and the museum, which contains many artifacts of the movement.

A key part of the contemporary summer season is the workshops. These are listed in a booklet given to visitors when they arrive and advertised on the Assembly’s official website. Some of the workshops involve appearances from high-profile TV mediums such as James van Praagh, Michelle Whitedove, and John Edward. Other workshops are on Spiritualist topics, such as these examples from a recent season: “History of spirit photography,” “Getting to know your spirit guides,” “Spirit art,” “Become a medical intuitive,” and

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