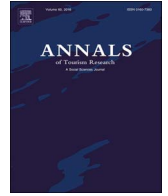


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## Examining the spirituality of spiritual tourists: A Sahara desert experience

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### Introduction

*And that was true. I have always loved the desert. One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing. Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams... "What makes the desert beautiful," said the little prince, "is that somewhere it hides a well..." (de Saint Exupéry, p. 8 to p. 70).*

Not all tourists are alike and neither are their motivations (Iso-Ahola, 1982), attitudes, benefits sought, or destination choices. Tourists can be seeking new experiences that are out of the ordinary (Graburn, 1983), and which can “add meaning to their lives” (Graburn, 1989, p. 22). Out of the ordinary experiences can be mundane or sacred (Nash, 1996; Graburn, 1989), secular or religious (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Vukonic (1996, p. 18) writes that tourism “provides people with the conditions for a constant search for... spiritual enrichment.” Many forms of tourism have emerged to facilitate such experiences; one of them is spiritual tourism, seeing “as a source of spiritual meaning or refreshment” (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011, p. 53).

There is no widely agreed upon definition of spirituality (Koenig, 2012). Spirituality, however, generally, relates to the connection with nature or a higher being (Reich, 2000), to the meaning of self within a broader ontological context, and is characterized by a continuing search for meaning and purpose in life (Kale, 2004).

Scholars have argued that modernity has exacerbated the decline of religion in society, and paradoxically disbelief in religious institutions has inclined individuals to look for spirituality elsewhere to fill in the emptiness engendered by the divorce of religion from societal spheres (Tacey, 2004). People have become more attuned to spirituality and its benefits. Concurring with other authors (e.g., Mitroff & Denton, 1999), Kale (2004, p. 99) remarks: “The transmodern lifestyle, in contrast to the compartmentalization mindset of modernity, recognizes the pivotal role of spirituality in defining a person’s identity; it challenges the arbitrary division of people’s lives between public and private, secular and sacred. Sharpley and Jepson (2011, p. 53) explain, consequently, “people now seek less formal, structured and ritualized means of achieving spiritual fulfillment. Tourism, in particular, has been identified as one such means”.

The concept of spirituality in tourism arises to a very limited extent within the literature relating to religious tourism (Stefko, Kiralova, & Mudrik, 2015). Researchers agree that spirituality is a concept strongly related to that of religion (Preston, 1992; Marra, 2000; Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013), a link which means that most research studies approach spirituality in tourism from a religious standpoint (Chesworth, 2006; Mansfeld & McIntosh, 2007). There is also the argument that spiritual tourists may not necessarily be religious individuals (Timothy & Conover, 2006).

Sharpley and Jepson (2011, p. 53) argue that “in comparison to the relatively extensive religious tourism literature, however, few attempts have been made to verify the claim that individuals seek or experience spiritual fulfillment through tourism”. Norman (2012, p. 34) supports that “Studies that look at specific instances of spiritual tourism are important and interesting in their own right, to be sure”. He laments the inconsistency of using the term ‘spiritual tourism’, and critiques the authors who conflate

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pilgrimage with spiritual tourism, “lacking any sort of explanation or delimitation” and who “nonetheless seem to have no clear way of distinguishing between ‘spiritual’ and ‘religious’” (p. 23).

The word spiritual appears sporadically in tourist studies and spiritual tourism has been used interchangeably with religious tourism, and even, sometimes, confused with community tourism where, for example, visits to Thai temples are axiomatically presumed spiritual (e.g., Sarawut, Panithan, & Subchat, 2013). Despite its increasing popularity (Timothy & Conover, 2006) spiritual tourism remains under-researched (e.g., Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017). Interestingly, while the newly published Encyclopedia of Tourism (Jafari & Honggen, 2016) contains 700 entries, there is no single entry for spiritual tourism. However, 19 entries (e.g., Pilgrimage Tourism; Religion Tourism; Sacred Journey, Tourism) contain results for ‘spiritual’.

There is a distinction between what Wuthnow (1998) calls “dwelling spirituality” and “seeking spirituality”, with the former being traditional and takes place in dwellings such as temples, cathedrals and churches (Shackley, 2001), while the latter has no boundaries and can be sought anywhere (Giordan, 2009) -in rural landscapes (De Botton, 2003), wilderness areas (Ashley, 2007), forests (Harvey, 2001), seaside (Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017), and other natural areas (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Commentators submit that the natural environment offers a spiritual substitute for traditional and non-traditional religious groups, supporting that religious groups compete with the natural environment as a supplier for spirituality (Ferguson & Tamburello, 2015). These authors argue that many rural areas have begun to view their lakes, mountains, forests, coasts, etc., as valuable commodities to generate tourism.

Studies focusing on spiritual tourism in natural areas (e.g., Narayanan & Macbeth, 2009; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017) support the role of recreational tourism in facilitating spiritual experiences: their tourists are, nevertheless, not necessarily spiritual tourists. For example, drawing on research into tourists’ experience of the English Lake District, Sharpley and Jepson (2011) reveal that although tourists do not purposefully visit the Lake District in search of spiritual fulfillment, their visits frequently embrace a subconscious emotional dimension. These tourists may be classified as ‘casual’ spiritual tourists. The present paper is the first to examine the spirituality of tourists who are intentionally seeking a spiritual experience in a destination that has particular attributes to facilitate that particular experience and which has been overlooked. With its almost limitless natural space, the desert offers a perfect congruence with spirituality (see Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 2003 [1943]; Narayanan and Macbeth, 2009). Thus, the present paper’s originality lies in its focus on what might be referred to as *authentic spiritual tourists* (individuals whose trip motivation is to intentionally seek spiritual fulfilment). This approach reflects Norman’s (2012, p. 20) definition of spiritual tourism as “tourism characterised by a self-conscious project of spiritual betterment”. Therefore the purpose is not to assess whether tourism facilitates spirituality, but to empirically uncover spirituality in spiritual tourism. As such, the paper discusses the responses to one key question: (since spiritual tourists are by definition tourists in conscious quest of spirituality) what meanings do spiritual tourists ascribe to spirituality during their sojourn in the Sahara desert?

In addition, to further our understanding about spiritual tourism we have made use of Iso-Ahola’s (1982) seeking and escaping motivation model. Iso-Ahola argues that people participate in recreation and tourism to seek and escape some environments and find a sort of equilibrium in their lives. The general discussion about spirituality revolves around escaping and seeking: in general terms, spirituality is about a search, a quest, a pursuit, and finding meaning. Correspondingly, the following sub-questions guide the study: What do Sahara desert’s spiritual tourists escape and seek? What facilitates spirituality in the Sahara desert? How is spirituality manifested? Spiritual tourism research is very limited and has been limited to conceptual studies lacking in empirical field-based research (Norman, 2011; Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017). It is our hope that this approach will add to the existing literature.

## Spiritual tourism

Notwithstanding the similarities in the conceptualisation of spirituality offered by different researchers, noted by Miner-Williams (2006), it is apparently impossible to arrive at a consensus on its definition, according to Kinjerski and Skrypnek (2004). The concept has nevertheless sustained the interest of many authors across several disciplines. It is almost four decades since Cohen (1979) emphasised that every individual has spiritual connections with peoples, regions and social contexts. The spiritual life is in a sense an experiment, the objective of which is to “appreciate life” (Mager, 2003) or the search for the meaning of life (Bahm, 1974; Meraviglia, 1999).

A number of authors have suggested that spirituality can be related to the higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Burack, 1999; Butts, 1999; Emmons, 2000; Mitroff & Denton, 1999) and that at its apex -self-actualisation-, individuals pose for themselves questions concerning the mind, the body and the spirit (Marra, 2000). Others propose that certain triggers awaken the spirituality in an individual and precipitate the quest for a sense of meaning in his or her life (Marques, 2006; Wright, 2000). Most of the definitions to be found in the literature imply that spirituality encompasses a personal search for meaning and a belief in a superior being or supreme power (Kale, 2004; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999).

There is evidence that some forms of tourism experiences “embrace some form of spiritual fulfillment” (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011, p. 68). In the opinion of Collins-Kreiner (2010), all tourists who set out on spiritual journeys are doing so mainly in pursuit of a new sense of meaning in their lives. In their tourist typology, Yiannakis and Gibson (1992) clearly distinguish spiritual tourism as a form quite different from the rest, associating it with enhanced self-awareness and meaningfulness of life. MacCannell (1976) argues that modern tourists are nothing other than secular pilgrims, while Allcock (1988) agrees that tourism is a substitute for organised religious practices. The concept of spirituality remains only weakly integrated into tourism research (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson et al., 2013; Jarratt & Sharpley, 2017). Spiritual tourism is expected to experience sustained growth in coming years (Timothy & Conover, 2006), having first emerged during the 1960s in the form of journeys resembling pilgrimages. Consequently, it was frequently examined from a religious perspective (Elias, 1991; Marra, 2000; Tart, 1983) or regarded as simply one of the constituent elements of religious tourism (Jackowski, 1987).

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