

Current issues

What is tourism's history?

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The conventional view of tourism's past is dominated by the history of western cultural experience. Tourism starts with the wealthy, with images of prestigious visits to spas and seaside resorts, Grand Tours and the activities of business entrepreneurs such as Thomas Cook, before it begins to filter down the social ladder. This paper argues that more attention should be paid to tourism's past in non-western societies and cultures and to the more ordinary and routine practices of a wider cross-section of the population. It is too simplistic to portray tourism's evolution as a geographical process of diffusion from one or two core areas and a social process of downward movement from the affluent. Reasons for the prevailing image of tourism's past are suggested and several ideas are proposed for broadening research into its history.

One summer's day in August 1887, an 11-year-old girl and her nine-year-old brother set out from their Oxfordshire village to walk the eight miles to the local town to spend a month's holiday with their aunt and uncle. The journey itself was full of novel experiences:

A streak of clear water was to them what a cataract might have been to more seasoned travellers; and the wagons they met, with names of strange farmers and farms painted across the front, were as exciting as hearing a strange language.¹

A new world was encountered in the small town, with different customs and sights; where even visiting the local shops was a memorable event. The holiday, informally organized, a short distance from home, and involving little expenditure, became a vital experience in the lives of these relatively poor children. Furthermore, their visit forms just as much a part of the history of tourism as a trip to a spa or seaside resort, a Grand Tour, or an exotic journey under the care of Thomas Cook. Yet, it is the latter images which dominate our ideas of tourism's past (and here I plead guilty myself),² and which have created a particular view of how tourism has evolved over time. In this review, it is argued that much of

what we know and think is important about the evolution of tourism is conditioned by certain historical perspectives and that a conventional view of the past requires considerable revision.

A conventional view of tourism's history

Tourism history as it appears in much tourism literature can be summarized briefly. It is largely concerned with the activities of the affluent, occurring in particular tourism settings such as resorts or lengthy tours. These forms of tourism are prestigious events which occurred periodically in people's lives and their significance is generally assessed in quantifiable terms such as length of visit and economic outlay. But, fundamentally, this is a history of western cultural experience; beginning with the leisured élites of ancient Greece and Rome, the re-emergence of tourism in the Renaissance, and the development of spas and Grand Tours in the 17th and 18th centuries. The story continues with the seaside resorts of the 19th century and the spread of international tourism through the agency of Thomas Cook and his successors. From the mid-20th century, the whole movement is accelerated by the jet aeroplane and charter flights. Within this process,

tourism is seen as dispersing geographically ever outwards from its origins in Britain and Western Europe, creating a series of 'pleasure peripheries',³ and spreading socially from the upper classes, down through the middle ranks and ultimately to the mass working classes. Important agents in this movement are social emulation, improvements in technology (especially transport)⁴ and the role of innovators and entrepreneurs.

But, is this really the essence of tourism's history? The emphasis is on the occasional and prestigious episode and a mechanistic portrayal of tourism spreading outwards from a European heartland and permeating downwards from a wealthy élite to the mass of the population. It is tourism that was essentially organized and involved the most time and money. Such a view, however, underplays the informal, the routine, the 'ordinary', more localized, tourism practices as they have varied between and within countries and cultures. Experiences which involved less time and expenditure, but were nevertheless significant in the lives of the participants, become overlooked.

This conventional image is a 'colonial' view of tourism history, whereby an activity defined by and researched in western cultures is seen to have been brought over time to new peoples and societies. Yet, we know remarkably little about the history of leisure in cultures such as China, India and Japan and it is hard to believe that forms of tourism did not exist in the past in these societies. So far, all we have studied is a western model of tourism evolution, not how it has varied in different cultures in different times.

Why has the conventional view prevailed?

There are a number of reasons why this particular version of tourism's history has endured. The nature of the source material most readily available tends to emphasize particular social groups and activities.⁵ Tourists' diaries, letters and journals generally represent the wealthy and powerful in society and the high survival rate of these documents increases the social bias in the record. Diaries and journals tend to be concerned with the more remarkable travel events in people's lives rather than the routine. Thus, the Grand Tour is much researched but only occasionally have documents related to visits to friends and relatives survived in detailed form.⁶ Large-scale and organized tourism developments such as spas, seaside resorts, mass entertainments or travel companies have tended to generate their own literature and commentary.⁷ Small-scale, informal activities tend to go unrecorded. In addition, the statistical measurement of tourism only began in the 1920s⁸ and, even here, the bias towards international tourism data underplays domestic activity.⁴

Another reason for the prevailing conventional

view of tourism history relates to tourism research itself. Most research (including historical work) takes place in Britain, other parts of Western Europe and North America.⁹ This work has both defined and dominated studies of the subject. Research from other regions is rare and linguistic barriers compound the western focus of research. In addition, links between tourism studies and history are poor. Much of the best work on tourism history has come from historians investigating leisure but their findings rarely penetrate tourism literature.^{5,9} Thus, social history has suggested important local and regional variations in leisure practices^{10,11} as well as questioning simplistic notions of class emulation.^{12,13} There may also be an element of what Green¹⁴ terms 'metaphorical tourism', in the preferences of researchers for particular eras and forms of leisure. Certainly, in the more popular historical studies of tourism there has been a strong nostalgic streak for 'golden ages' of travel.^{15,16}

Linked to the above reasons is the tendency for tourism research to have been conceptualized by the functional needs of the tourist industry.¹⁷ This has resulted in a perspective that views the past more in terms of key personalities, firms and organizations (Cook, Lunn, Butlin and Disney), technological innovation (railways, ocean liners, motor cars, aeroplanes) and business innovations (travellers' cheques, package tours, charter flights), than more informal activities.

Variations on well-known themes

Reference to a number of apparently well-known episodes in tourism's history can serve to demonstrate how the past is more varied and complex than is generally depicted.

The 18th-century Grand Tour of Europe has been much studied with research utilizing the extensive range of journals, letters, diaries and guidebooks which have survived.^{2,18} From this evidence, the tastes and attitudes of a particular group of travellers can be distinguished, as well as their routes and destinations, forms of transport, accommodation and lengths of visit. Links between the tour and art and architecture in Britain have also been extensively reviewed.¹⁹⁻²² But there are significant omissions from the record. We know very little about the host societies, whether directly catering for the needs of visitors or simply as detached observers. There is relatively little written about the other nationalities travelling Europe at the same time.²² In addition, as the Grand Tour is studied as an isolated event, it is rarely placed in the context of particular leisure lifestyles and life cycles, such as country house visiting, the London season, and visits to spas and seaside resorts. Was, for instance, the tour repeated in modified form in later years? How did the experience of a Grand Tour influence leisure and tourism

in later life? The data to investigate such questions are scarce, but the point is that the questions have rarely been posed. Only occasionally do we see the Grand Tour within the wider picture of 18th-century life and leisure.^{23,24}

The growth of specialized tourist places such as spas and seaside resorts has also attracted much attention. They generated a wealth of research material but attention has tended to focus on the visitors to such places and, with some notable exceptions, we know much less about the resort workers.²⁵⁻²⁷ There have also been few studies of the function of resorts as centres of consumption: of luxuries and other goods and services creating distinct patterns of supply and demand.²⁸ Cultural variations in resort development remain to be explored fully. The continuity of spa life in Hungary always attracted a wide social clientele.²⁹ The spas of the southern states of the USA in the 19th century served a rural market, whilst spas in the north were largely urban in character.³⁰ Leisure habits for the German bourgeoisie in the mid-1800s were often highly localized and this contributed to the lack of resort development on the north German coast until the early years of this century.³¹ In contrast, affluent Italian social life in the same period embraced local town, country spas and seaside resorts, yet travel abroad was limited and rarely extended beyond Switzerland and the South Tyrol.³²

Studies of resort evolution also tend to trace the history of success, whereas a fuller picture is a complex pattern of success and failure. The period of spa growth in England (c. 1550-1820) was marked by a multitude of spa births and deaths, not a smooth projection of rise and decline.³³ And, it is also too simplistic to see these English spas operating in isolation from a much wider urban leisure system. In addition to London, many towns and cities in the 17th and 18th centuries acquired a leisure function, of which spas were really the most specialized extreme.^{34,35} Leisured society moved between both spa and leisure town.

Second homes, those temporary retreats from urban to rural settings, have a long history. Although the usual picture is generally confined to western societies, tracing descent from the Roman and Renaissance villa,³⁶⁻³⁸ there is evidence of this practice in other cultures. Both sides of the Bosphorus, around Istanbul, had country houses. There were the 'rais' of Algiers on the Sahel hills and indications, from the 11th century onwards, of Chinese 'pleasure houses' with their water gardens and groves. If the phenomenon is less obvious in the Far East, this has in part been attributed to the inadequacy of documentation.³⁹ Second houses were not simply the preserve of the wealthy either. Green has shown how a variety of social classes acquired second houses around Paris in the last century and each group had differing motives for rural havens.¹⁴

The development by the relatively poor of cheap holiday homes on small plots of land in later 19th century Britain owed more to self-help than social emulation⁴⁰ and reinforces wider notions of middle- and working-class families creating their own leisure patterns and practices.^{7,10-13}

These limited examples suggest that, even for episodes in tourism's history that are fairly well documented, conventional images are too restricted and overlook the immense variety of experiences that were taking place in the past.

Conclusion: exploring tourism's history

Having argued the need to expand our horizons over what constitutes tourism's history, a number of suggestions are offered as a stimulus for further research.

New geographical areas need to be incorporated into tourism history studies. Western concepts of leisure and tourism should be placed within a much wider historical perspective. Stronger interdisciplinary links with history also remain a priority within the field. Bailey's conclusion on the evolution of leisure as 'erratic, complex and contentious' has a clear message for tourism history.¹² Unless tourism history engages in the theoretical and ideological debate that exists among leisure historians, then it will remain as a superficial preface to contemporary tourism research.

Part of this process requires a closer integration of leisure, recreation and tourism rather than compartmentalizing them into separate areas. Historians have been unencumbered by these divisions and so have produced richer contextual studies of leisure and tourism. By moving away from seeing tourism journeys as isolated events, research should embrace wider tourist lifestyle and life-cycle frameworks. Closer examination is also needed of conditions operating in the centres of demand where there have been important local and regional variations in leisure cultures.⁴¹⁻⁴⁴ This more holistic systems approach also highlights themes of change and continuity within tourism development. Some systems have had remarkable long-term endurance, others have experienced rapid rise and decline. Were some changes the result of technological innovations (simply creating different patterns) or the result of more deep-seated processes of cultural change?

Tourism history also needs to become more ideologically aware. Unstated value judgements permeate many commonly held views of the past. The idea of 'decline' for resorts, for instance, has often related more to a change in social class than the numbers of visitors. The vision of a 'golden age' of tourism before the masses owes more to social attitudes than reality. Elsewhere, it is only relatively recently that the role of women, both as tourists and as tourism workers has been acknowledged^{25-27,45-47}

and the role of children has hardly been touched upon.

Exploring these alternative perspectives requires a search for different sources of material. Oral history offers many exciting possibilities for studies of leisure and tourism in the recent past and has the potential to place these experiences within the context of everyday lives.^{41–44} Works of fiction, especially social novels, are another source that deserves further attention. Novels can provide valuable insights into the relationship between leisure and tourism and the mentality of a particular culture. For Britain, the works of Smollett, Jane Austen, Dickens, Trollope, HG Wells and Arnold Bennett are a rich source which can be quarried either for factual information or for deeper enquiries into themes such as sense of place.⁴⁸ Similar ideas apply to using the visual arts. Paintings, drawings and photographs can be used at one level for factual evidence of leisure scenes but can also be analysed for an understanding of contemporary culture. Herbert, for example, has explored the relationship between Impressionist art, leisure and Parisian society, combining picture analysis with socio-historical material, and has indicated how art can give a view of phenomena rarely recorded elsewhere.⁴⁹

Thus, paintings of the north French coast in the 1860s often subtly depict encounters between the growing number of visitors to the area and the local population. At an earlier date we have Ludolf de Jonghe's 'Farewells Before a Country House' which, Schama claims, portrays a whole world of 17th-century Dutch leisure culture.⁵⁰ Alexander Carse's (1812) 'The Visit of the Country Relations'⁵¹ not only shows the meeting of urban and rural cultures but how this encounter affects males and females in very different ways. Thus, literary sources from fiction and the visual arts are not merely surrogates in the absence of more 'hard' data, but constitute a valuable source in their own right for understanding leisure and tourism in past ages.

I have argued in this review that much of tourism history, as seen through the eyes of tourism studies, is too narrow and simplistic. In questioning a number of assumptions and suggesting alternative perspectives the above discussion is intended as a starting point for debate and further research; very few answers have been provided. At its heart, however, lies the belief that the history of tourism is more the story of significant variations in different cultures at different times in different places, rather than the story of an inexorable spread of West European concepts and practices to the rest of the world.

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