

EXPERIENTIAL/IMMERSION TOURISM/TRAVEL

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Abstract: *This paper introduces a new trend in tourism-experiential/immersion tourism/travel. Rooting itself in experiential learning, it has close ties with experience economy, services economy, and experiential marketing, and has already produced an offspring-experiential virtuality. The paper investigates the main features of this type of tourism-activity-based travel, culinary travel, and cultural exploration experiences-which relate it to other types of tourism: authentic tourism, creative tourism, and transformative tourism. The paper also presents new concepts such as immersion in the local culture and way of life, tourist experience, experiential tourism descriptors, and standards for experiential tourism.*

Key words: *experiential/immersion tourism, experiential/immersion travel, tourist experience*

INTRODUCTION

Experiential/immersion tourism/travel is a “form of tourism in which people focus on experiencing/immersing (in) a city, country, culture, or place (country, site) by actively and meaningfully seeking out or engaging in things that make the place what it is” – its culture, environment, food, history, and people. [2]

Fermata, Inc. [17] claimed “experiential tourism shows rather than describes; it allows the tourist to be an active participant in the experience.” Lew [1] claimed that experiential tourism can have different meanings: “[...] doing anything that falls outside of a standard sightseeing, museum-going itinerary. [...] interactions with locals or [...] going to places that might not be considered tourist attractions at all.” Dalimunthe & Taufik [3] defined experiential tourism as “a tourism concept that prioritizes the subjectivity aspect in its consumption patterns.”

Experiential tourism is intrinsically interconnected with experiential marketing, hence the importance of the former for the experience economy (“an economy in which many goods or services are sold by emphasizing the effect they can have on people’s lives” – Cambridge Dictionary) [4,7,14,18] and for the services economy [8]. Recently, authors have identified a new trend in experiential tourism – experiential virtuality [13,20].

It consists mainly in activity-based travel, culinary travel, and cultural exploration experiences. Examples:

- Climbing: Mount Toubkal (Morocco);
- Cooking street food: Vietnam;
- Diving: Dahab (Egypt);
- Going hiking: Patagonia (South America);
- Going on a road trip: Canada;
- Making wine: Bordeaux (France);
- Staying in a homestay and getting to know the local people and culture;
- Taking a city break (with a cooking class, a food tour): Shanghai (China);
- Taking a volunteer tourism trip;
- Travelling to places that are off the beaten path: Chinese Silk Road (China), Inner Mongolia (Mongolia).;

- Trying halal tourism (“any tourism object or action which is permissible according to Islamic teachings to use or engage by Muslims in tourism industry” [1,5,21].

Experiential tourism/travel draws its name from experiential education, a concept introduced by “American educational reformer, philosopher, and psychologist John Dewey (1859-1952)” in his book *Experience and Education* (1938), whose core idea is an education that emphasizes the need to learn by doing (i.e., through a “hand-on” approach) [9]. The term experiential travel was first mentioned by Gattorna [6].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material studied in this paper consists in books and articles on experiential tourism/travel. The method used is documentation.

RESEARCH RESULTS

To understand experiential tourism, one needs to understand tourist experience [10]. Almost two decades ago, Uriely [19] identified four noteworthy conceptual developments in the study “of the tourist experience corresponding to the so-called “postmodernist” theorizing in the social sciences”:

- “A turn from differentiation to de-differentiation of everyday life and touristic experiences” (→ “tourism activities that can be reached directly from places of activity in everyday life”);

- “A shift from generalizing to pluralizing conceptualizations” (→ paying attention to the variety and motivation of visitors);

- “A transformed focus from the toured objects to the tourist subjective negotiation of meanings” (→ “role of subjectivity in the consumption patterns of visitors at tourist attractions”);

- “A movement from contradictory and decisive statements to relative and complementary interpretations” (→ “view considered to have deep meaning in each object, and to be based on the need to seek authenticity”).

This view of “postmodern tourism” points too two main developments associated with the postmodern era [22,23]:

- “Simulational” postmodern tourism, focused around “hyperreal” experiences (e.g., “simulated theme parks and other contrived attractions as typical postmodern environments”);

- “Other” postmodern tourism (i.e., experiential tourism), focused on the search for the authentic (conventional mass tourism, countryside, environment-oriented holidays, historical sites, nature, and nostalgic tourist attractions).

Gray [3] described “two types of tourists with different characteristics – sun-lust tourists and wander-lust tourists”:

- Sun-lust tourists or general-interest tourists are tourists who are very sensitive to price; have accommodation standards; have expectations of weather conditions; “visit a destination with the main aim of rest and relaxation”;

- Wanderlust tourists or special-interest tourists are tourists who have the motivation “to admire natural beauty that has never been seen before, to get new experiences, and to learn new cultures; and prefer destinations that offer cultural uniqueness and natural beauty that contain learning values”.

Smith [16] identified the descriptors of experiential tourism:

- a movement beyond services, to experiences;

- a shift from active holidays to holidays as an experience;

- “an outgrowth of global movement toward experiential learning, whereby people create meaning through direct experience”;

- an “umbrella for adventure tourism, eco-tourism, heritage tourism, nature tourism, nature-based tourism, resource-based tourism, transformational travel”, and other niche areas;

- encouragement “to actively participate in the experience and promote activities that draw people outdoors, and into cultures and communities”;

- encouragement to participate in and promote “activities that draw people into cultures, communities, and the outdoors”;

- memorable visitor experiences for both visitors and providers.

Smith [17] proposed a set of 20 standards for experiential tourism:

1. “People create meaning through direct experience (e.g., riding and/or walking alongside a horse/oxen-drawn covered wagon across the open prairie or over hills, eating food prepared over an open fire, fording streams, and using no modern conveniences).

2. The experience includes the people met, the places visited, the activities participated in (e.g., feeding the cattle bales of hay and supplements) and the memories created.

3. The experience includes pre-departure trip planning (e.g., maps, photos) and post-trip follow-up (e.g., messages, photos).

4. Experiential tourism draws people into local nature, culture, and history (e.g., standing in the ruts made in the prairie by the covered wagons on an actual portion of a traditional trail).

5. Experiential tourism is low impact (a 2-4-h stay), low volume (small groups), and high yield (200-300 USD per visitor).

6. Experiential tourism is very personal, unique, and individual for each visitor (e.g., each member of the family takes away a unique experience from the same activities).

7. Quality, memorable visitor experiences are a shared outcome between the visitor and the experience provider (e.g., each visitor lights the fire).

8. Experiential tourism opportunities allow for personal growth and reflect the values and interests of the individual visitor (e.g., a history professor).

9. Experiential tourism provides diverse experiences that match the visitor’s interests and provide a sense of personal accomplishment, thereby creating their own unique memories (e.g., hand-made willow furniture and accessories).

10. The desired outcome of experiential tourism is to achieve a complete participatory experience that provides new knowledge and authentic experiences (e.g., taking care of a horse).

11. Experiential tourism opportunities encourage the meeting and coming together of different cultures, their problems and potential (e.g., interaction with both past and present, and good and bad life aspects).

12. Cultural elements are shared in an atmosphere of traditional ways of life (e.g., activities that take the visitor to genuine elements).

13. Experiential tourism shows rather than describes (e.g., actual operational elements of feeding cattle and hogs, gathering eggs in the chicken house, or gathering and/or weeding vegetables from the garden).

14. Experiential tourism opportunities expand personal horizons e.g., witnessing calving).

15. Experiential tourism opportunities should provide personal enrichment, enlightenment, stimulation, and engagement as motivators (e.g., exercise, experience, learn).

16. Experiential tourism attracts people to places (e.g., a birding place).

17. Experiential tourism attracts markets (i.e., tourists) to merchandise (e.g., handmade products).

18. Experiential tourism engages all five senses (e.g., a horseback ride appeals to sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch).

19. Experiential tourism opportunities include learning a new skill or engaging in a new activity (e.g., shelling, and earing maize).

20. Experiential tourism includes “the story of the place” (e.g., who built the house, where the owners came from, how and when they got there, etc.).”

CONCLUSIONS

Experiential learning has been introduced in the practical teaching of experiential tourism, can have a positive impact on a country's economy and has its own standards.

Experiential tourism provides experiences with transformational qualities and shares “some of the features of other types of tourism – other types of tourism: authentic tourism, creative tourism, and transformative tourism”. Experiential virtuality turns experiential tourism into never-ending tourism and could be a niche tourism in Romania.

Immersion in the local culture and way of life consists in:

- booking a cooking class making local dishes;
- booking a homestay;
- doing some volunteer work;
- eating at independent restaurants;
- experiencing local entertainment (e.g., football game, gig, or theatre show);
- getting off the beaten path;
- joining in with a community-improvement activity (e.g., beach clean-up);
- speaking to as many people as possible;
- staying in the destination for an extended length of time (e.g., through slow tourism, i.e., “travelling for a prolonged period at a slow pace, allowing the tourist a deep, authentic, and cultural experience”);
- taking a walking tour led by a local;
- using a housesitting app;
- using independent/local taxi firms rather than Uber.

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