

Book Review

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Handbook of Niche Tourism

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Tourists travel for a huge variety of reasons, some of which are highly specialised and involve relatively small numbers, but their activities, understood as niche tourism, contribute to economic, social and cultural sustainability in many parts of the world. Niche tourism is often viewed as a panacea or virtuous counterpoint to mass tourism, sometimes neglecting the diversity and complexity of tourism activities that might be considered under this heading. People have a desire to do something different and achieve memorable experiences but these activities must be considered in the context of sustainable development and may also consider potential increases in domestic tourism in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Beginning with a concise overview of the history and definition of the term ‘niche tourism’, this collection of essays is cognizant of the potential negative impacts of niche tourism, providing a balanced mix of theoretical, conceptual and empirical chapters with a broad global perspective. Organised thematically in seven sections, the last of which engages with the very recent impact and implications of COVID-19, the publication provides a critical overview of developments in niche tourism and the understanding of the phenomenon around the world. Running throughout are questions around tourists’ motivations for travel and the activities that they engage in, which may be identified as micro- or sub-niches within a broader tourism market.

The need to respect nature and the impact of human activities on the environment is central to Part I. Food and drink dominate Part II but, with nostalgia becoming a prominent theme in Part III, there is greater recognition for industrial heritage (Chapter 15, 16). Understanding history is central to chapters in Part IV that deal with battlefield tourism in Borneo and the Cold War Museum in Lithuania. Part V links spiritual, religious and wellness tourism, with consideration for the macro (understanding the breadth of religious tourism, Chapter 24), to the micro (Babymoon travel in India, Chapter 25). Part VI recognises socio-economic challenges and discrimination, while Part VII examines new developments related to the duration of holidays, virtual activities and destination-less travel.

From a pedagogical perspective, it is relatively easy to select individual longer chapters from the collection for use with students without losing the theoretical underpinning, as each chapter provides concise but comprehensive reviews of literature, often placing the chapter in a broader context. Each of the chapters provide a detailed methodology, which also serves a pedagogical purpose, providing students and emerging researchers with models for applying different approaches to the topic. Some of these are spelled out in greater detail than might normally be required but, as a handbook, the structure of each chapter with literature review, methodology and context clearly stated is helpful to the reader. Many of the chapters lean significantly on the previous work of Marina Novelli, an editor of this handbook, and co-author Mike Robinson, who recognise that niche tourism is a contested concept, which can be subdivided into macro- and micro-niches (Novelli, 2005; Robinson and Novelli, 2005). Efforts to define niche tourism with reference to Robinson and Novelli provide a common thread through the chapters and contributes to the independence of each chapter as a stand-alone entity but it does also lead to repetitiveness when reading the entire volume.

Practitioners and tourism developers may similarly focus on individual chapters but the interconnections and variety of perspectives provide greater value. While the collection is delineated into seven sections, there is some overlap – an obvious example being the inclusion of astro-tourism in both Part I on Nature-based Tourism and Part II on Rural Tourism. Similarly, elements of Communist heritage tourism in Part III on Heritage and Culture-based tourism align well with chapters in Part IV on Dark Tourism, while an examination of accommodation provision in Italy (Chapter 31) could fit just as well in Part VII. There is an emphasis on the impact of COVID-19 in Part VII but many of the preceding authors also give consideration how the pandemic affected their examples of niche tourism initiatives. These overlaps and the difficulty with terminology are sometimes acknowledged by the authors, allowing the reader to make connections rather than having studies pigeon-holed within one area. Many chapters aim to provide definitions in order to overcome confusion, perhaps arising out of tendencies to misidentify, generalise, homogenise or objectify niches (O'Regan, 2013). In this volume, a wide range of, perhaps less familiar terms are presented, from architourism (Chapter 3) to developmentourism (Chapter 29), with some providing sub-categories in an effort to refine an understanding of the tourism market and tourists' motivations for travel. It is noteworthy how forms of tourism fragment as they develop (p.321), intensifying the micro-niche, as exemplified in many chapters of this book. This includes distinguishing among subdivisions of nature tourism, including wildlife tourism and geotourism in Chapter 5, between dark and cemetery tourism in Chapter 22, or understanding religious tourism in Chapter 24 as encompassing Faith, Spiritual and New Age tourism.

Each section ends with a short 'In focus' chapter that provide concise examples that could serve a significant pedagogical purpose in the context of Higher Education. Each of these give consideration to residents and local communities. In Part 1, Joanna Kosmaczewska examines the outdoor game of geocaching in Poland, which may be 'a form of leisure for local residents and contain potential for niche tourism development' (p.65). For Part 2, Faye Taylor highlights the impact of film tourism on beaches in Thailand, and efforts at development that, in this instance, present 'a destination that is socially and environmentally unviable for residents and tourists alike' (p.141). The 'In focus' chapter for Part III engages with contemporary arts tourism in West Africa, highlighting how exhibition spaces and festivals influence new patterns of mobility, noting the role of grassroots contemporary arts in stimulating community development.

In Part IV, a very unusual attraction – training restaurants in prisons – are examined in the context of gastronomy tourism, in a study that also considers future economic benefits to local communities. The case study on religious tourism in Varanasi, India in Part V, demonstrates the transformation shaped by tourism, linked to government policy for tourism development and processes of modernisation. An important point is that research in this area can inform urban planners and industry stakeholders towards creating a better tourist profile. In Part VI, the value of partnership with communities to create memorable experiences in South Africa is highlighted, recognising challenges as a legacy of Apartheid in the country and recognising the role and contribution of women. Two short case studies conclude Part VII, focusing on hot air ballooning in the Czech Republic and ‘flights to nowhere’, whereby the act of travelling and not the destination is the key factor.

While some examples of niche tourism are inextricably connected to particular places, such as Prosecco tourism in Italy (Chapter 8) and artichoke tourism in Spain (Chapter 9), Andrzej Stasiak notes: ‘The themes of escape rooms in Poland are not much different from those around the world’ (p.209). This does not undermine Francesc Fusté-Forné’s definition of niche tourism as a specialist form of tourism that promotes local authenticity (p.100), or the prominent theme centered on a sense of place that recurs through many chapters, although tourist activities are not always connected with the heritage of the region in which they are located. In contrast, the growth of ‘one month stay’ travellers from South Korea exemplify a desire to experience and support local cultures (Chapter 33).

Many activities that attract tourists also provide opportunities for recreation for local residents, whether this be abandoned railway branches in Brazil (Chapter 15), Escape Rooms in Poland (Chapter 17) or religious practices in India (Chapter 27). The benefits of niche tourism activities to both tourists and hosts are explored in relation to festivals in Albania in Chapter 11, language tourism in Chapter 18, and social tourism in Chapter 28. Some authors also point to potential harmful impacts on host communities or uneven exchanges between tourists and host, such as in Chapter 29, where Smithers and Ailwood note ‘the importance of community consultation as a tool for minimising the harmful impacts of school visits’ (p.346) in Zimbabwe.

Many chapters examine opportunities to participate in activities connected to nature or that contribute to sustaining the natural and cultural landscape. Several chapters point to the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), providing examples of their relevance and implementation. A recurring issue relates to pollution, from light pollution in Chapter 1 on astro-tourism to criticisms of the unnecessary use of fuel on ‘flights to nowhere’ in Chapter 38. The impact of climate change on activities such as glacier tourism (Chapter 2) and nature tourism (Chapter 4), leading to ‘last chance tourism’, is illustrated, raising questions around tourists’ motivations, ethics and the responsibilities surrounding conservation, sustainability and landscape degradation. While Chapter 3 presents some potential approaches to protecting susceptible spaces, there is a fine line between managing access and satisfying visitor expectations around access and experience. Some chapters signal the need for regulation, whether in relation to sustainable development or, as exemplified in relation to Escape Rooms (Chapter 17), safety standards. There is acknowledgement that grassroots efforts at tourism development are sometimes undermined by official or top-down developments, such as the building of an Ecological Education Centre near the Izera Dark Sky Park on the Czech-Polish border in Chapter 1. Chapter 26 on Pilgrimage Tourism in Japan

emphasises the importance of understanding the imposition of external values and policies and how this may impact on both the experience and the local community.

Another recurring theme relates to the role of (niche) tourism in serving an educational purpose – either intentionally such as in the case of language tourism (Chapter 18), or more indirectly by providing information about the environment, pollution, local culture and historical developments. Chapter 28 emphasises the need for added benefit in social tourism, understanding that ‘social tourism is seen as a tool in education’ and can be ‘designed to cultivate a critical awareness among citizens’ (p.337). Chapter 29 notes the benefits and challenges to schools in Zimbabwe which gain additional income from school visits by tourists. There is learning in many of the activities described across the chapters, the impact of which is more significant as it is part of a memorable experience, but Chapter 22 on cemetery tourism in Slovenia also emphasises the importance of understanding different modes of interpreting sites.

Marketing is an important factor in the development of niche tourism and it is shaped by the commodification of experience, whether that be the joy of pregnancy (Chapter 25) or religious beliefs (Chapter 24), which Chapter 34 argues challenges ‘the sustainability of niche tourism in its original form’ (p.403). A greater understanding of the motivations behind tourist choices can inform sustainable development, recognising, for example, that individuals may travel to a religious site out of a desire for well-being rather than adherence to a formal religion (Chapter 26). Marketing can also impact on host communities, as demonstrated in Chapter 30 where marketing is ‘an important mediating factor in the encounter between mainstream society and the gay community’ (p.366). In this instance, tourism can lead to ‘decreasing intolerance in relation to homosexuality and improved social inclusion’ (p.366).

While the collection does encompass examples from Africa, Asia and South America, the majority of chapters focus on European countries, with Chapter 1 providing an example of a cross-border initiative. Three others, Chapters 18, 24 and 30, examine the definition and phenomenon of language, religious and gay tourism respectively, without focusing on one particular place. The role of national agencies and funding from national governments undoubtedly shapes the lived experience but, particularly in Europe where there is freedom of movement across international boundaries, there is an opportunity to consider the lived experience of tourists, which can be transnational.

The handbook provides an eminently readable resource for undergraduate students and presents authoritative models of research for established scholars, teasing out important current topical issues. Many chapters point to the need and potential for further study, an invitation to the reader to continue. In trying to find connections, I found that the index was limited and did not provide easy direction to some of the topics that I identified while reading. Nevertheless, I found it a stimulating read and I look forward to returning to many of the chapters in the future.

References

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