

The Search for Inner Peace: Considering the Spiritual Movement in Tourism

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Abstract

This paper explores how frustrations with contemporary societal issues such as excessive materialism and secularism influences the personal meaning individuals seek and derive from their travel experiences. It considers the potential reasons behind the renewed interest in spirituality and the ramifications for the tourism industry. This is achieved through sharing insight from a wider study of individuals who engaged in travel with Hands up Holidays, a tour operator offering spiritual travel. The paper finds that certain individuals view travel as being a powerful agent in mitigating the effects of negative aspects of their society, achieving personal growth, shaping attitude change and assisting in their personal quest for inner peace.

Key words: spirituality, materialism, secularism, peace.

Introduction

Many individuals in contemporary times are struggling to find inner peace. It is argued that issues such as excessive materialism, secularism, stress and concerns about global warming, poverty and terrorism, a lack of personal time, isolation, rising fuel prices, and rapidly advancing technology and civilisation growth have left many feeling empty, and disconcerted (Belk, 1985; Cushman, 1990; Elgin & Mitchell, 2003; Hartmann, 1999; Lengfelder & Timothy, 2000; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). In an attempt to re-establish personal meaning and purpose in life, increasing numbers of individuals, particularly in the Western World are seeking to engage their spirituality (ibid). It is suggested that the spiritual boom be thought of as a largely Western phenomenon because Eastern societies have never abandoned engaging the spirit, and do not face a number of issues that have negatively influenced individual spirituality, to the same extent as people living in Western societies (Belk, 1985; Cushman, 1990; Dorn, 2001; Hartmann, 1999; Kissman & Maurer, 2002; Miovic, 2004). Spirituality is regarded as being a human universal that represents every human being's search for personal meaning and connection within their life (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Hardy, 1979; MacDonald, 2000; Miner-Williams, 2006; Timothy & Conover, 2006).

Scholars argue that many individuals are purported to be engaging their spirituality through travel; specifically, they are using travel to search for greater meaning in life through understanding more about themselves as individuals (Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005; Timothy & Conover, 2006). Despite this, there has been little research exploring how the spiritual movement influences tourists' experiences and motivations. Through sharing insight from a wider study of individuals who engaged in travel with Hands up Holidays, a tour operator offering spiritual travel, this paper explores how frustration with modern life influenced the personal meaning individuals sought and derived from their travel experiences.

Seeking inner peace in modern life

Much of the Western World is argued to be largely driven and seek meaning primarily through materialistic goods (Singh, 2006). Materialism “can be conceptualised as the consumption style that results when consumers perceive that value inheres in consumption objects rather than in experiences or in other people” (Holt, 1995, p.13).

The development of goods and services has certainly presented the current generation with many opportunities and choices that previous generations did not have (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1978; Lansley, 1993). Lansley suggested that a wealth of new products and possessions has enabled people to lead more diverse and interesting lives, and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton purported that to some extent, materialism has been able to help people to strengthen their personal values or goals. However, Lansley (1993, p.29) suggested that the question to be asked is: “Despite the greater diversity and excitement of modern living, has it lead to more fulfilling lives for the individual and greater welfare for the society as a whole?”. There is a view amongst scholars, that despite some positives, the materialistic consumption style that is evidenced throughout much of Western society does negatively impact on the personal contentment of individuals (Hartmann, 1999; Kitchen, 1994; Lansley, 1993). Kitchen, for example, argued that the emptiness and angst caused by materialism could be thought of as a new, subtle form of pollution. Belk (1985, p.266) also stated, “The materialistic traits of greed, miserliness, and envy can also be pathological and can lead to human misery”. Similarly, Maritain (1947) argued that materialistic conceptions of the world and life can only end in failure because they cannot satisfy the requirements of the person.

Excessive materialism has become particularly prevalent since the end of World War II, when the Western World started to achieve unparalleled growth (Lansley, 1993). Since this time in particular, people have been trying to fill their ‘empty selves’ through a yearning to “acquire and consume” (Cushman, 1990, p.600). ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ has become a central concern of many modern people, whereby they will purchase or become envious of goods simply because their friends, counterparts or neighbours have done so (Lansley, 1993). Elias (1991) argued that this is a reflection on a narcissistic society, and that the current prevailing culture is one of selfishness and harmful emphasis on self.

There is evidence to suggest that increasing numbers of people are recognising the negative impacts that a materialistic lifestyle can have on their search for inner peace, and are trying to break free of this lifestyle (Elgin & Mithcell, 2003; Holt, 1995; Lansley, 1993). For example, Lansley (1993, p.32) suggested that, “There is evidence of a more enduring frustration with the stress associated with ‘volume consumption’” and that, “There is also a sense that there are other more important and sustainable routes to happiness than through material wealth and that conspicuous consumption may be less a sign of success than a moral or spiritual vacuum”. There is also reported to be a significant social movement occurring called voluntary simplicity, which describes a way of life signified by the balance between inner and outer growth (Elgin & Mitchell, 2003; Holt, 1995). Scholars have suggested that voluntary simplicity could represent a major transformation in people’s values, social movements and consumption patterns:

The essence of voluntary simplicity is living in a way what [sic] is outwardly simple and inwardly rich. This way of life embraces frugality of consumption, a strong sense of environmental urgency, a desire to return to living and working environments which are of a more human scale, and an intention to realise our higher human potential – both psychological and spiritual – in community with others. The driving forces behind voluntary simplicity range from acutely personal concerns to critical national problems (Elgin and Mitchell, 2003, p.146).

This growing voluntary simplicity movement is argued to be the direct opposite of a materialistic lifestyle, and involves striving to live a life of material simplicity in order to pursue moral responsibility, spiritual growth, and self-actualisation (Elgin & Mitchell, 2003; Elias, 1991; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Voluntary simplicity has also been compared to the social philosophy of such spiritual leaders as Jesus Christ (Elgin & Mitchell, 2003). Singh (2006) concurred that more people are engaging with their 'spiritual intelligence', and by doing so they understand that they currently live in a world of great material abundance and multiple external choices, but also great spiritual poverty, and impoverished internal states.

The rise in materialistic values in the Western World is argued to be mirrored by a rise in secularism. Many people are said to be yearning to return to a past that they believe was built upon sound religious values; an increase in interest in spirituality is argued to be caused in part by a possible backlash to the dramatic rise of secularism through the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond (Barnwell & Iggulden, 2007; Cushman, 1990; Fuller, 2001; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). The rise in secularism in the Western World is in stark contrast to much of the non-Western world, as Latin America, parts of Asia and Africa have recently seen an upsurge in religious activity (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Organised religion in particular is argued to be in a sharp decline in the Western World; this can be evidenced through falling church attendance in many Western countries, and in Britain for example, "Organised religion is in near terminal decline" (Barnwell & Iggulden, 2007). Indeed, Dr David Voas of the University of Manchester who oversaw a study exploring secularism in Britain commented that, "The dip in religious belief is not temporary or accidental, it is a generational phenomenon - the decline has continued year on year....we are at an advanced stage of secularisation" (Barnwell & Iggulden, 2007).

It is difficult to determine the exact reasons for increased secularisation in Western society, but Bridger (2001, p.12) has argued that many see organised religions, "not as vehicles for the attainment of personal spirituality, but rather as obstacles to it. Their perceived ethos is one of social control rather than personal liberation". Thus, large numbers of people are turning away from organised religion, and looking to engage their spirituality in ways that work for them personally (ibid). For this reason, Hamilton (2000) claimed that people are increasingly preferring to 'pick and mix' and find personally meaningful ways to engage with existential questions and the nature of existence. Others have suggested that celebrities (Sifuentes, 2008), or 'time' (Wheeler, 2008) have become the predominant religions of the Western World; many people are more interested in the lives of their favourite stars; or 'living in the now' than pursuing a relationship with God/Higher Power. In addition, Zinnbauer et al. (1999) argued that some people choose to be spiritual but not religious because they have either lost confidence in church leadership, or have had previous experiences of being 'hurt', physically, sexually, and/or mentally by the clergy. It may also be that a number of people no longer feel that religion is an appropriate topic to discuss with others. For example, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p.1) wrote that all the managers they interviewed about spirituality in the workplace, "viewed religion as a highly inappropriate form of expression and topic in the workplace. They saw spirituality, on the other hand, as a highly appropriate subject for discussion". However, many have argued that the absence of faith in one's life will lead to a lack of inner peace, purpose and meaning (Elias, 1991; Harris, 1996; Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

The relationship between tourism and spirituality

Traditionally, scholars viewed travel as being devoid of spiritual meaning. Early scholars such as Boorstin (1964) and Lowenthal (1962) viewed travel as wholly hedonistic, and shallow. They argued that people travel in luxury, stay in their tourist 'bubble' and gain

nothing of any personal meaning. These scholars viewed tourists as 'rich' and 'selfish', and saw travel as of peripheral importance to the lives of individuals. Indeed, Boorstin (1964) socially criticised tourism as being a symptom of moral decay in modern capitalist societies. Tourists were seen as the, "Camera-toting foreigner, [an] ignorant, passive, shallow and gullible" individual (Cohen, 1994, p.527). Early conceptualisations of tourism thus essentially saw tourism as the quest for the superficial and unchallenging (Polkinghorne, 1989), and early conceptualisations of tourists' experiences emphasised their distinctiveness from everyday life (Uriely, 2005). For example, Boorstin (1964) saw travel and tourism as simply being recreation whereby people recuperated from the stresses of daily life, but found no deeper meaning, and that tourism attractions were, "of little significance to the inward life of people" (p.119). Further, Lowenthal (1962, p.124) argued that, "Despite the phenomenal increase of the tourist industry in recent years, the suspicion still endures that travel for its own sake is an idle pleasure". Some scholars also questioned the motivations and sophistication of 'tourists', who were predominantly seen as privileged (Towner, 1985) and 'economically endowed' (Howe, 2001).

Conversely, recent scholars have sharply rejected the notion that tourism is simply an idle pleasure, devoid of meaning, and have argued that tourism holds significant meaning to most people, and as such, can form a significant part of peoples' lives (Franklin & Crang, 2001; MacCannell, 1973; Uriely, 2005). Tourism is viewed as not merely 'physical'; it includes an array of mental and spiritual experiences (for example, Dann & Cohen, 1996; McIntosh & Mansfeld, 2006; Seaton & Bennett, 1996; Smith, 2003; Timothy & Conover, 2006). Travel is not seen as purely hedonistic and scholars have argued that travel is not an idle pleasure. Franklin and Crang (2001), for example, found that most tourists are likely to experience some degree of discomfort through their travels; travel makes people tired, they may get sunburnt or may get sick.

Further, tourists' experiences have conceptually developed within the literature from being seen as homogeneous, and separate from everyday life, to being seen as personal, subjective and inseparable from everyday life (Cohen, 1979; Noy, 2004; Uriely, 2005). However, researchers are increasingly recognising that travel experiences incorporate more than solely physical travel to a place; they can be spiritual, involve psychological and physical benefits, altruism, personal development and life change (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Tourists are viewed as active participants in the creation of experiences; they imbue them with personal meaning and situate them within their wider lives (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2005; McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Selby, 2004).

A number of scholars have acknowledged that tourism can significantly assist people in finding meaning and purpose in their lives, and is imbued with personal significance (for example, Beeho & Prentice, 1997; Cohen, 1979; Crouch, 2007; McIntosh & Mansfeld, 2006; Noy, 2004; Palmer, 1999; Ryan, 1995; Uriely, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Zahra, 2006). Certain travel is also purported to be a rich setting in which the traveller can experience transcendence; that is to reflect upon their lives, and extend their capabilities. Indeed, Smith and Kelly (2006) suggested that tourists frequently seek destinations and activities that are transcendent. De Botton (2002) similarly postulated that people are attracted to sublime landscapes where they feel small and insignificant, but part of an infinite and universal circle; certainly, many wilderness and natural tourism settings would meet these criteria. Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) also noted that people use wildlife and the wilderness to reflect upon their lives, and find solitude; more so they argued today, because in modern times many people do not take time to look at the stars. Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that wilderness, rural, and nature-based attractions contain a myriad of spiritual dimensions (for example, Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Ivakhiv, 2003; Schanzel & McIntosh, 2000; Schmidt, 2005; Singh, 2006).

Methods

This paper is part of a wider research project which involved the building of strong and trusting relationships with eleven individuals who had travelled with one tour operator, Hands up Holidays, within the previous 12 months. Over a period of 18-24 months, the author communicated a number of times with these individuals to explore the personal meaning they derived from their travel experiences with Hands up Holidays. Discussion relating to the role of travel in facilitating inner peace amongst individuals frustrated with contemporary society is included here. Hands up Holidays offers personally meaningful and enriching travel to more than 30 countries around the world and stands against selfishness and greed, exploitation against Earth's resources, and any situation which treats people as a means to an end. It is built upon the view that people in the West have much to offer disadvantaged communities, but it is frequently Westerners who have more to learn from other communities than they can teach them (Hands up Holidays, 2011). Tours generally last from 14-21 days and typically four of these days will be spent undertaking voluntary activities. Christopher Hill, the founder and owner of Hands up Holidays, believes that for some, deep meaning will be derived primarily through religious encounters; others may find, for example, elements of volunteering, adventure, culture, heritage, or nature-based tourism personally meaningful (Hands up Holidays, 2011). The operator thus seeks to offer a diverse range of tour options and travel experiences within their tours (ibid).

Results

A common theme arising from content analysis of conversations with individuals who engaged in travel with Hands up Holidays was the consensus that significant parts of the Western World have 'lost sight' of what is truly meaningful in life through being overly materialistic, secularist and/or holding poor morals and values. As a result each individual discussed the desire or need to re-ground oneself periodically in a culture that holds 'the right' values; they viewed travel as an avenue to build one's mental health and maintain inner peace which could otherwise be lost through the 'meaningless' elements of society. For example, Lana discussed how she was shaken by a sudden realisation that her children had become 'victims' of materialism. She stated, "*I did not want them to view this life as the way to live, I needed to 'shock' them into what was really important in life*". She explained further, "*I took them to Mexico to show them that way of life but that obviously wasn't working; I decided then to take them somewhere out of their comfort zone, no technology, no materialism*". Sharen similarly used Hands up Holidays as an education for her children and noted that travel is one of the most effective ways in imparting important values to children. She explained, "*I wanted to really teach my children a lesson, and I couldn't do that in New Zealand, it had to be the complete opposite of here... I think it is the responsibility of every parent in the Western world to expose their children to this*". Other illustrative quotes included, "*In a way the recession is a good thing because it will force us to address what is really important*" (Laura); "*Everything now is such a throw-away society, even relationships*" (Nyla) and, "*I only keep things that hold meaning to me*" (Charlotte)

Further, to the above, Laura, Amy, Sharen and Rhys discussed how they sought to immerse themselves in a culture that they believed was grounded in more traditional religious values than their home country (New Zealand). For example, Rhys discussed how in Vanuatu he asked to live with a Christian community and to engage his faith through being able to interact with local nuns. He commented, "*I found it really nice in Vanuatu because it is much more of a Christian culture [than New Zealand]*". These individuals discussed how, at times, they feel it is difficult being Christian in New Zealand because of perceived over-secularism. Sharen commented how her husband lost a job because of conflicts between his Christian

values and his employer's values. She commented, *"He had to take care of her needs, and I mean any needs"*. Amy commented, *"In New Zealand there is a feeling sometimes that you can't really be around like-minded people; in Vanuatu that was different"*. The religious tourism literature has discussed at length how individuals travel to immerse themselves in a culture that they feel more 'fits' their religious faith (for example, Graburn, 1989; Rinschede, 1992; Vukonić, 1996). However, it should be noted that one individual, Lana, presented a view that is in contrast with much of this literature. She explained how she sought to escape religion rather than immerse herself in it, and that, in her view, the United States was 'under-secularised'. She commented, *"This religious fundamentalism and kooky spirituality really is scary and I have to get away"*.

In addition to commenting that parts of the Western World were overly-materialistic and secularised, certain individuals described how the morals and values of many people in their country were poor. In particular, individuals commented that there was a lack of connection, friendliness, compassion and love between societies in the Western World. Illustrative quotes included, *"People here are very loose"* (Rhys); *"There is a lot of stuff going on here that certainly could not be called Christian"* (Amy); *"In America, there is not a closeness between people... People do not say hello to each other"* (Brendon); *"People just walk on by listening to their Ipods not caring about anyone else"* (Lana) and, *"The kids over there, they are not broken like they are here [New Zealand]. They don't get given everything and have such good manners... They have beautiful souls"* (Nyla).

A further category raised amongst certain individuals was an association of feeling 'guilt' because of one's association with the Western World, and the resulting desire to travel in a manner that minimised this guilt. For example, Nyla commented that part of the reason why she selected travel with Hands up Holidays was because it, *"Lessened the feeling of guilt that comes every time I travel"*. She commented that she feels guilty because, *"When you travel overseas you are the wealthy foreigner – the fact that I work three jobs and clean dunnies [toilets] at schools to pay for my trips doesn't mean a thing to them there, we are still the wealthy foreigners"*. Amy similarly commented, *"I feel guilty about not helping people out as much as I could and it was good that I could do that on this trip"*. Further illustrative quotes included, *"I have a feeling of being so privileged just because of where I was born and so I feel obligated in a way to help others through travel... Many individuals never have the chance to travel anywhere, so I need to make it count"* (Laura) and, *"I feel horrible because of my association with the U.S and I want to show that some good can come out of there"* (Lana). This finding supports the work of Sin (2009), who discussed that the ability to ease one's guilt is becoming a growing consideration amongst individuals when choosing their travel destinations.

The desire to reground oneself in what was personally meaningful, and specifically, escape the material values of Western society, was further illustrated by the fact that most individuals requested of the tour operator that they were not cushioned by Western luxuries; for example, most individuals asked to sleep with locals, and often on the floor of locals' homes, rather than staying in a resort. Individuals saw this as an important element of personal growth, and an avenue in which they could engage their search for personal meaning. To illustrate, Charlotte commented *"I can stay in a hotel whenever I want and I wouldn't have got as much out of it if I had chosen that option"*, and Sharen explained, *"I said earlier that I really wanted to shock the kids, and the only way I could do that was by being authentic, by sleeping on the floor with the ex-head-hunters!"* Additional quotes included, *"I wanted to sleep in the same place as the people, if that was a bit rough, I'm used to it, that's fine"* (Brendon) and, *"I didn't care if I bunked it, as long as I had the top bunk! I didn't need all the swanky things"* (Nyla).

Further, a number of individuals described encountering illness during their travel; reported ailments including vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches, fatigue, heat stroke and altitude sickness were common. However, each individual noted that they expected to become ill when travelling to their respective destinations and some mentioned that overcoming illness was a source of personal growth and pride. To illustrate, Amber discussed how, although feeling nauseous, she conquered the Inca Trail, a dream of hers. She explained, "*I was really not very well and my legs were jelly, but I kept going; no-one was going to stop me doing that, and I did it*". Nyla similarly explained, "*When you're put in those situations; extreme heat, not feeling the best, and you get through it, you do feel a certain amount of pride in yourself*". Further illustrative quotes included, "*I did get a bit of the wobbly belly but that's all part of it I think*" (Sharen) and, "*I had headache and was so hot but it was all worth it*" (Charlotte). This discussion illustrates that travel is not always the hedonistic pursuit that it is sometimes portrayed as being (for example, Boorstin, 1964).

Conclusion

This paper adds credence to the argument that increasing numbers of individuals are becoming frustrated, angry, and/or depressed at aspects of Western culture; in particular, materialism, secularism, and or 'poor morals and values' (for example, Belk, 1985; Cushman, 1990; Hartmann, 1999; Miner-Williams, 2006). To ground themselves in what is personally meaningful, certain individuals discussed the need to periodically immerse oneself in a culture wholly different from their own. This holds considerations for how one views the role of travel within the wider life of individuals and how it may assist with the search for meaning, purpose and peace in life. Specifically, it challenges the argument that there is no need for travel within the lives of individuals and one can gain everything travel offers within one's own home surroundings (e.g. Munt, 1994). Munt (1994) based his arguments on the notion that the world has 'come to every individual'; for example, one does not have to leave their home setting to taste international food or experience alternative cultures. This paper illustrated, however, that certain individuals viewed they could only find particular meaning within their lives by travelling beyond the boundaries of their home destinations. This is evidenced by Sharen's quote, "*I suppose it's sad to say but I needed to shock the kids and I couldn't do that in New Zealand*".

The degree to which Lana became disenchanted with the "*Braindead materialism*" of the U.S.A and the discussion from Sharen, Lana, and Karen of the need to travel to 're-centre' themselves" holds further considerations for scholarly knowledge. Specifically, these research participants believed that they had multiple 'homes' and, in some cases, felt more at 'home' in their travel destination than their country of residence. Laura, for example, commented, "*My home is New Zealand but really, so is Peru*", and Lana discussed in detail how she views the people of India as her 'comrades'. This consideration supports the arguments of scholars including Cohen (1979) that people can have many 'spiritual' centres; although they may reside in one destination, they may not feel this is 'home'. They may hold a deep connection, or derive significant life meaning or purpose from a destination far away, or that they have never visited. 'Home', thus conceptually does not solely consist of a physical presence; one can view a place as home because of a psychological or emotional connection to that place. Further, it adds credence to Wilson and Harris' (2006) argument that the dichotomy of 'home' and 'away' is much too simple a division and need to be extended in any discussion of spiritual or personally meaningful travel.

This paper also adds consideration and support to the view that travel can be considered the world's peace industry (D'Amore, 1988). Through experiencing personal growth through encountering travel conditions that challenged their values and thoughts and presented a non-

Western way of living, individuals within this study reported greater personal contentment and peace within their lives. Individuals discussed how achieving peace within their own lives created a snowball effect; they could then expose and challenge others, such as their children or colleagues to adopt different attitudes and values. It may be that, if materialistic and secularist values continue to dominate, the search for personal nostalgia through travel continues to be a strong motivator for individuals. Indeed, the wishes to experience destinations that were slower in pace and had stronger family and religious connections were highlighted by individuals within this study. Far from seeing the destinations they travelled to as poor, individuals reported the richness of their surroundings; richness being conceptualised as connection with family, friends, faith and what is truly meaningful in life.

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