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Riding the Thai elephant and the search for ‘authenticity’

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Abstract

Consumers’ search for authenticity is considered to be one of the underpinnings of contemporary marketing (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003) and part of a wider story about the disenchantment with aspects of current life. Tourism experiences provide one way of escaping the ordinary and experiencing alternative ways of being. Yet how can highly staged tourism experiences satisfy needs for ‘authentic’ travel experiences? This paper uses stories from participants at the Elephant and Mahout Training School in Northern Thailand, interpreted from differing perspectives on ‘authenticity’, to address this paradox and reflect on the role of the organisations that structure and facilitate tourism experiences.

Introduction

What is considered an ‘authentic’ tourism experience reflects individual dreams and desires as well as historical trends. Travel patterns of independent travellers have changed significantly over the past few decades. In the 1960s and 1970s, long term independent travel involving the overland trek to London or extended travel in South-East Asian was seen as a marginal and unusual activity. From the vantage point of 2007, it is hard to remember just how unfamiliar Asian countries were to Westerners in the 1970s. Tony Wheeler, founder of Lonely Planet (a publisher of guide books for travellers) remembers it this way:

We looked north to South-East Asia, at that time almost a terra incognita. It’s hard to imagine how little known the region was less than thirty-five years ago. Today Thailand is one of the world most popular tourist destinations, but in the early 1970s it was still stamping out a smouldering Communist insurgency and tourism meant R&R from the Vietnam war...In the final month of our Asian trek [in 1973] ...we’d witnessed Bangkok starting to substitute international backpackers for vacationing American Soldiers (Wheeler and Wheeler, 2005, p.44).

Fast-forwarding to current times, backpacking had become mainstream, a widely accepted rite of passage for young people associated with ideals of freedoms, personal development and fulfilment. O’Reilly (2006) reporting on research with backpackers, suggests that many see a period of travel, the so-called ‘gap year’ as “an enjoyable part of their education, or as a period of fun and independence before taking on the roles of responsible adults” (p.998). More broadly, changes have

also been observed in the nature of independent travel over the past few decades. An online travel survey in 2003 (with over 7500 respondents, mainly from Europe, North America and Australia) found that the typical independent traveller of the 21st century is a professional, with a degree or postgraduate qualification. In general, people were taking trips of 1 to 3 months' duration, combining adventure, activity, relaxation and culture. There was also a strong desire to reach those undiscovered corners of the world and a view that travel has become a necessary escape from the pressures of modern life.

Desire for escape that embodies a turn back to nature and adventure can intersect with government attempts in developing countries to use ecotourism as a means to sustainable conservation of endangered wildlife. One such example is the Elephant and Mahout Training School, (part of the National Elephant Institute) in northern Thailand. The term 'mahout' signifies a professional elephant handler and this training school promotes tourism among those interested in experiencing the lives of the mahouts and elephants firsthand in a natural environment (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2007).

While course participants are generally travellers from Western countries, programs are advertised as imparting knowledge to elephant keepers and aspirants, both Thais and foreigners on the correct way to care for their animals, provide basic health care and train young elephants. Research activities and veterinary programs undertaken by National Elephant Institute, enhance the credibility of the claims to the 'authenticity' of this ecotourism destination, giving tourists a sense of contributing to a wider international cause and engaging in socially responsible tourism.

It seems paradoxical that this highly staged tourism experiences can satisfy needs for 'authentic' travel experiences. To help understand this apparent tension different perspectives on 'authenticity' will be examined.

'Authenticity' matters

Authenticity, claims author Salman Rushdie (1991), is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. As a concept, authenticity has been well canvassed in tourism literature and more broadly in contemporary culture.

The desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture. Whether in our search for selfhood, leisure experience, or in our material purchases, we search for the *real*, the genuine (Fine, 2003 p.153)

Limitations of space in this paper do not permit a full review of the literature on authenticity. However, a brief discussion of differing perspectives sets the scene for forthcoming discussion of the

search for authenticity at the elephant camp in Thailand. For an extended discussion of authenticity and detailed clarification of the varied meanings of authenticity in tourist experiences see Wang (1999).

MacCannell (1976) in introducing the term 'authenticity' to the tourism literature, conceptualises 'authenticity' as the degree to which an object or experience are original or genuine. He is critical of 'staged authenticity' which he argues presents and preserves cultural heritage as 'authentic' for the gaze of tourists but detrimental to local cultures. This commodification of heritage, he argues, serves the needs of neither locals nor tourists.

Central to this perspective is the assumption that object and experiences can be judged against an objective criterion. Wang (1999) in his categorisation of types of authenticity labels this type of authenticity 'objective authenticity'.

In contrast to 'objective authenticity', 'constructive authenticity' refers to authenticity projected onto objects or experiences by tourists or tourism producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences or dreams (Wang, 1999). Taking this perspective, there is no single 'objective authenticity' as different people will construct 'authenticity' differently. Different interpretations will arise from different personal experiences and varying contexts.

Wang (1999) in his typology of authenticity introduces a third category that he calls "existential authenticity" which involves an alternative experience through tourism. Here tourists can be participants rather than just spectators. Two general types of existential authenticity are distinguished - *intra-personal* and *inter-personal* (Wang 1999). Intra-personal focuses on the self, both with the body involved in relaxation, diversion, excitement and play, and with 'self-making' or identity work. Inter-personal authenticity relates to experiences through connections with family and friends, old and new.

The pleasure of tourism exists not only in seeing exotic things, but also in sharing and communicating this pleasure with other tourists who are seeing the same sights together (Wang, 1999, p. 365).

The idea of 'existential authenticity' aligns well with postmodern notions of 'self' as constructed, and 'identity' as a continual work-in-progress. Contemporary individuals experience a much wider range of life options and possibilities than previous generations. The dynamic process through which individuals make meaning of their lives and incorporate these meanings into future action forms the basis of Giddens' (1991) concept of 'the reflexive project of the self'. "Each of us not only 'has', but *lives* a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life (p.14)". Travel can offer a ready means of alternative ways of being, self-understanding and personal development

Travel often provides situations and context where people confront alternative possibilities for belonging to the world and others that differ from everyday life. Indeed, part of the promise of travel is to live and know the self in other ways (Neumann 1992 in Wang, 1999 p.359).

Returning to elephant riding in Thailand, it would be easy to be cynical about the quest for authenticity in what are obviously highly staged interactions with elephants and their mahouts. From an objective perspective, two or three day training camps hardly replicate 'authentic' mahout training experiences. Yet drawing on constructive and existential notions of authenticity it is possible to examine both the benefits to tourists and the Elephant Institute of this particular form of ecotourism. Would-be 'mahouts' and the Elephant Institute work together to create a series of 'authentic' activities to mutual advantage of both parties.

Working with stories from the elephant camp

A narrative approach was used gain a rich understanding of the way a small number of participants engaged in 'mahout training'. The use of a narrative approach in this context reflects several key concerns that are central to narrative research, an interest in people's lived experience and a desire to allow research participants to contribute to determining key themes covered (Elliot, 2005).

A web-based search was undertaken to collect tales of participant experiences of 'mahout training'. From the range of commentaries available three stories were selected for their rich descriptions of experiences at the elephant camp. This sampling approach is best described as purposeful sampling where sampling is driven by the research purpose and information rich cases are selected for study in depth (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is suitable where the research is concerned with specific characteristics and experiences. Cases are selected to yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalisations.

In analysing these stories my focus was not on a comprehensive content analysis, rather it reflects a specific intention to develop a selective portrayal of elephant camp experiences framed by theoretical concerns with construction of 'authentic' travel experiences.

Co-creating 'authenticity: Riding elephants and living with the mahouts

In coming to the elephant camp, participants in 'mahout' training camps bring with them their expectations, dreams and fantasies, constructing their own ideals of authenticity. The realisation of these dreams is actively supported by a highly structured two or three-day program. Supat the course manager acts as a mediator, teaching 'trainee mahouts' the commands to the elephants, facilitating interactions with the elephants and photographically documenting various aspects of the participants' performances. These photographic records play a key role in the authentication of the experience and a material form to communicate aspects of the performance to friends and family.

Stories told by three particular travellers Michelle (McCue, 2004), Fi (Mahout School, 2007) and David (Rich, 2007) provide the basis of the following section. Discussion centres around three main themes: the expectations and dreams participants brought to the experience, the facilitating function of the organisation, particularly the course manager, and the role of this tourism experience in prompting self understanding and self mastery.

In relating their experiences the participants tell of fun, personal challenge, concern for and awe of nature and companionable experiences with elephants and other travellers. Their stories also and illustrate how authenticity can be constructed in different ways. David and Fi bring dreams of adventure and escape:

All the time we were getting ready to start our big trip, I was humming "and off she ran to Hindustan and was never seen again" to myself... I imagined that the elephants would recognise me straight away as a kindred spirit and welcome me with enveloping trunks. **Fi**

I can identify with kids who hunger to join the circus...When I stumbled onto the website for a mahout school an hour south of Chiang Mai, Thailand, I knew I'd found my ideal back-up profession: elephant trainer supreme. I grabbed the first available three-day course, arriving with half a dozen excited [fellow] students: a young German couple, Dutch sisters, a miniature Japanese girl and me. **David**

Michelle, by contrast, presents intellectual and altruistic reasons for her interest in participating in the elephant school.

As responsible travellers, especially in developing countries like Thailand, we often find ourselves caught between our consciences and our curiosity. Fortunately I discovered one place in Thailand that satisfied both my elephant curiosity and my desire to protect this endangered species.

Michelle

Daily activities for participants are highly structured. The exotic nature of the experience and the limited duration of the program contribute to the need for a highly stage-managed activity.

Supat, the course manager, escorted us to our home-stay quarters and handed out schedules listing the 14 basic elephant commands, none of which I could begin to pronounce. First hurdle: darn Thai elephants only speak Thai. **David**

Rituals have also been developed that support the co-creation of an 'authentic' experience for participants. These include being introduced to one's 'own elephant' bearing appropriate treats of sugar cane, donning 'mahout' clothes at the commencement of the training session, performing with the elephants for tourist audiences and a graduation (certification) ceremony for successful participants in the course. The following quotes capture the pleasure Michelle and David experience through engaging with the elephants in these rituals, which although planned maintain a sense of spontaneity.

My mahout training began at the show grounds where I met Sat-tit, a massive male elephant about 35 years old, who would be my partner for the day. Dressed in baggy denim mahout pajamas, I got to know Sat-tit over a breakfast of sugar cane and palm fronds—which he eagerly snatched from my arms, probing my pockets with his delicate trunk when the supply dwindled.

Michelle

We donned baggy pants and spiffy shirts in bright blue denim, instant mahouts-in-training. Then came the big moment, introduction to "our" elephants. I solemnly shook Pijaub's trunk and she shook me down for bananas. **David**

Self-knowledge and personal mastery was also a theme in the stories as illustrated by Fi and Michelle in the quotes below.

It might be better not to bring too much emotional expectation along with you when you fulfil a long-term dream. It was a truly wonderful experience but there were times when my muscles hurt, I was tired and a bit scared because I couldn't control the elephant and I thought I wasn't doing very well. I now realise that this was a very valuable lesson because in addition to learning

lots about elephants, I learned a bit about myself too. "Doing well" wasn't really on the agenda and I got a lot more out of it once I stopped worrying and started communicating better with the elephant and enjoying myself. **Fi**

Though my morning consisted mostly of falling, swearing, and perspiring, I eventually learned to mount and ride the elephant in true mahout style. No basket, no saddle, no rope or stirrups to pull myself up, just Sat-tit's helpful leg, ears and patient attitude. Sitting bareback atop one of the world's largest land mammals, I was awed by his strength, grace, and personality. **Michelle**

This intra-personal aspect of authenticity focusing on self-understanding and personal development is a feature of Wang's (1999) concept of 'existential' authenticity.

Concluding comments

These brief glimpses of stories from the elephant camp have illustrated both the complex and personal nature of constructions of 'authentic' tourism experiences. Attention has also been drawn to the somewhat paradoxical situation where tourists rely heavily on supporting organisations to assist in the facilitation of personal authentic experiences. The staging of these experiences for tourists however differs significantly from 'staged authenticity' where tourists are passive spectators of performances of cultural heritage. As consumers seek greater interaction with producers in the design and delivery of products and services and production of meaningful consumer experiences in a variety of markets, increasing understanding of the dynamics of co-creation will be needed by companies to provide resources that facilitate diverse consumer experiences.

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