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Introduction: thinking about the tourist experience

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In his now classic *Jupiter's Travels*, Ted Simon reflects upon

> the fascination with which I watch myself come closer and closer to merge with the world around me, dipping first a toe, then a foot, then a limb. Although I am made of the same stuff as the world, it used to seem that I might as well have been born on an asteroid, so awkward and unnatural was my place in the scheme of things… Then began a long apprenticeship, to become something certain in my own right, from which to see and be seen… to confirm that the world and I were, after all, made for each other.
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> (Simon 1979: 176).

Like innumerable others before him and since, Simon is writing about a journey. More specifically, he is writing about a four-year trip around the world on a motorbike (named 'Jupiter'), vividly describing the places he visits and passes through, the people he meets, and his adventures (and disasters) related to his mode of transport. Significantly, he also reflects at length on his personal experiences: his relationships with the people, places and cultures he encounters, the purpose of his journey and, in particular, his own life and how it has been transformed by his travels. Thus, his book is, in a sense, a story of two journeys: the physical trip through time and space, with an identifiable beginning and end; and a personal, spiritual journey of discovery and trans-formation extending beyond the temporal boundaries of the actual trip.

Interestingly, over 25 years later and at the age of 69, Ted Simon recreated or, maybe, attempted to relive the original journey by embarking on another global motorbike ride that was to last two years. Implicit in his subsequent account (Simon 2007) is his disappointment that not only had many of the places he originally travelled through changed dramatically, challenging his remembered experiences of them, but also that he too had changed, that perhaps the world and he were, in fact, no longer 'made for each other'. Ironically, the meaning of his travels had in some way been transformed, from a voyage of discovery into a nostalgic journey into the past, something that he accepts in the title of that account: *Dreaming of Jupiter*.

Nevertheless, Simon's books together are, on the one hand, just one example of a genre of writing that has existed for almost as long as people have had the means or ability to engage in travel (Robinson and Andersen 2002). Since Herodotus, the fifth-century BC Greek historian, wrote about his extensive travels – and is thus widely considered to be the first 'travel writer' – innumerable travellers (or tourists?) have written about their experiences, in so doing undoubtedly inspiring countless others to follow in their footsteps or, in Simon's case, tyre-tracks (see, for example, McGregor and Boorman 2005).

On the other hand, they are also, along with much other travel writing, populist or journalistic evidence of what has long been recognised and considered within the academic study of tourism: that to consume tourism is to consume experiences; moreover, that tourist experiences are not uniform, even within specific contexts and places. Whether on extended overland adventures as described in much travel writing or on a more 'typical' one- or two-week holiday (though there is, perhaps, no longer a 'typical' holiday), the tourist experience is unique to the individual tourist. The personal significance of tourism or holidays is largely defined by an individual tourist's own socio-cultural world – as Urry (1990a: 23) observes, 'explaining the consumption of tourist services cannot be separated off from the social relations in which they are embedded' – and that social world is dynamic and continually evolving. Equally, the ways in which tourists interact with destination environments, cultures and communities is very much determined by their own 'cultural baggage'; their perceptions, values, experience, knowledge, attitudes, and so on. It is often said that, by going away on holiday, you can escape from those around you but you cannot escape from yourself. The implication is, therefore, that there are as many tourist experiences as there are tourists, each experience defined by the individual tourist, the 'social fabric that surrounds them' (Ryan 1997a: 1) and their consequential relationship with the destination. Hence, understanding the nature of the tourist experience would seem to be a difficult, if not impossible task.

Nevertheless, tourism as a social phenomenon, involving the movement of millions of people both across international borders and within their own countries, cannot be understood without knowledge and explanation of the meaning or significance of tourism to tourists themselves, of their interactions with the sites, attractions, events and people they encounter, and of the multitude of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the nature and outcomes of those interactions. In short, fundamental to the study of tourism is the study of the tourist experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that attention has long been paid to it in the tourism literature from a variety of now well-known 'micro' perspectives familiar to anyone concerned with the study of tourism, such as tourism demand factors, tourist motivation, typologies of tourists and issues related to authenticity, commodification, image and perception. At the same time, equally well-known seminal works, such

as those by Cohen (1979a), MacCannell (1976) and Urry (1990a; 2002), have proposed broader meta-theories of how tourist experiences are framed or constructed by the social world of the tourist.

We shall return to these shortly, suggesting in particular that the need exists for more focused research into tourist experiences that reflect their ever-increasing diversity and complexity and their significance and meaning to tourists, hence the collection of contemporary studies presented in this book. First, however, it is useful to consider two questions relevant to the study of tourist experiences: what do we actually mean by the term 'the tourist experience'; and, what influence, if any, has the increasing social institutionalisation and, in particular, what might be described as the 'consumerisation' of tourism had on the nature of that tourist experience?

The former is, at first sight, relatively easy to answer; the tourist experience is, by definition, what people experience as tourists. However, a distinction must immediately be made between the specific services (often referred to as experiences) consumed by tourists within the context of a temporally defined holiday or period away from home, and the broader experience (*the tourist experience*) that they collectively contribute to. Tourist services/experiences may be thought of as those that are produced or provided by the myriad businesses, organisations and individuals that comprise the tourism sector; they are, in a sense, commoditised experiences that meet an immediate need (a meal, a flight on an aeroplane, accommodation, entertainment, etc.) and hopefully bring immediate but short-term satisfaction or benefits. *The tourism experience*, conversely, is the experience of being a tourist, which results not only from a particular combination of provided experiences, but also from the meaning or significance accorded to it by the tourist in relation to his or her normal socio-cultural existence (most usually considered in terms of the experience of difference, novelty or the 'Other'), and which may be mediated by characteristics of the destination.

Implicitly, therefore, the tourism experience brings longer lasting benefits or rewards to the tourist, perhaps fulfilling socially determined needs or objectives; for if it does not, what logic would there be in continuing to seek the tourist experience? Of course, logic might not be a defining element of the consumption of tourism – tourism has long been described as irrational behaviour corresponding to a 'lemming effect' (Emery 1981) – but, nevertheless, the tourist experience is, in effect, the significance of engaging in tourism. However, this immediately begs the question, when is one a tourist and not a tourist? Particular forms of tourism, such as a short-break or a two-week holiday, are temporally defined, yet the meaning or benefits of these commence with anticipation and continue with memories, which subsequently feed back into anticipating the subsequent period of tourism consumption. Thus, the tourist experience may be continual (particularly if one agrees with Urry's (1994) assertion that, from a postmodern perspective, most people are tourists most of the time, though defined in relation to their dynamic social existence in general and by their maturation as tourists – or

by their ascent of the 'travel career ladder' (Pearce 2005) – in particular. In this sense, the tourist experience then becomes not an experience determined by and distinct from the tourist's normal socio-cultural life but, rather, one element of it. Indeed, whilst this has undoubtedly long been the case for 'professional' tourists, such as Ted Simon, whose life, living and identity has been largely determined by his travel experiences, the same may now be said for tourists more generally.

This latter point relates to the second question above, namely, the extent to which the institutionalisation and consumerisation of tourism together have influenced the nature of the tourist experience. By institutionalisation, we mean that tourism has evolved, at least in western, developed nations, into a social institution; it has become an accepted, expected, 'democratised' (Urry 1990b), socially-sanctioned feature of contemporary social life, to the extent that to voluntarily exclude oneself from participation in tourism of any kind might be thought of as unusual behaviour. For example, a number of (non-academic) surveys in the UK have revealed that some tourists admit to not finding their annual summer-sun vacation a pleasurable experience, yet they continue to book their holidays year after year, perhaps finding it easier to endure the holiday than to explain why they would prefer to stay at home! Consumerisation, conversely, is used here as a term to describe the way in which tourism, along with other leisure activities, has come to be defined by commercial production and consumption; that is, where once leisure was active, simple and reflective, based upon an individual's intelligence, imagination and wit, there has been a move, according to Ramsay (2005: 31), 'towards fun and fashion, pampering rather than developing, lifestyle rather than living, buying into activities that are more isolating, though easily repeatable. In short, we have commodified leisure'.

Referring to tourism in particular, Ramsay goes on to cite John Carroll who, in his book *Ego and Soul: The Modern West in Search of Meaning* (Carroll 1998) describes contemporary tourism as the 'greatest and most successful lie of western, consumerist culture' (Ramsay 2005:102). By this, he suggests that tourists, through buying the annual summer holiday, believe they are purchasing a ticket to authentic encounters with people and places, to freedom from responsibility, from the consumerist realities of the everyday. In reality, according to Carroll, both tourists and the tourism industry are collaborating in a hoax where 'tourists persuade themselves that they are heroic and happy while in fact clinging to the few traces of the everyday which the holiday package allows them' (Ramsay 2005: 102). Far from escaping a consumerist routine, tourists are simply purchasing the opportunity to continue that routine elsewhere and, as a consequence, achieve instantaneous, short-lived consumption-based rewards, but are unlikely to benefit from reflective, developmental or meaningful experiences that are often claimed to be the purpose or outcomes of participating in tourism.

Taken together, the institutionalisation and consumerisation of tourism might suggest that tourists have largely become passive participants, encouraged

by the belief that it is a socially sanctioned necessity and by the dreams promised by the tourism industry. By implication, the tourist experience has become shallow, short lived and, perhaps, meaningless. This is not, however, a new argument. Rather, it simply reflects a debate that commenced with the beginnings of mass transport systems (that is, the train) in the mid-nineteenth century and, in one form or another, has continued ever since. For example, ruing the advent of mass travel, in 1869 the novelist Henry James described the then new tourists as 'vulgar, vulgar, vulgar', epitomising the traveller–tourist dichotomy that continues to underpin arguments surrounding the 'lost art of travel'. Indeed, in a chapter of that name, Daniel Boorstin famously lamented the 'decline of the traveller and the rise of the tourist', with all that implied for the nature of the contemporary tourist experience:

> The traveller, then was working at something; the tourist was a pleasure seeker. The traveller was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him… he expects everything to be done to him and for him.
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> (Boorstin 1964: 85).

Importantly, however, and as already noted above, the tourist experience is largely defined by the tourist's own socio-cultural world, a world that is constantly dynamic and evolving. Thus, whilst the rational, modernist culture of the first half of the twentieth century, characterised in the context of production-consumption by Fordist mass production, the dominance of the producer and the diluted, homogeneous cultural value of mass goods and services, (collectively referred to by Featherstone (1990) as the 'production of consumption'), was undoubtedly mirrored in the production, consumption and experience of tourism in particular, the subsequent emergence of a post-Fordist consumer culture, within which the consumer becomes dominant and the act of consumption has taken on wider socio-cultural significance (Lury 1996), has also undoubtedly been reflected in the practice and meaning of tourism. Not only do tourists enjoy a far wider choice of experiences (in the sense of experiences as products) – a vast array of new places, attractions, events and peoples have become commoditised as tourism products – but, as a result of technological advance, particularly the Internet, and innovation in the delivery of tourist services, they are able to actively exercise those choices according to the personal significance they attach to tourism in general, and to specific places, activities and experiences in particular. By implication, therefore, the nature of the tourist experience has itself become more complex; although tourism continues, perhaps, to play a functional role as a 'safety valve' that maintains society in good working order (Krippendorf 1986), the ways in which this role is fulfilled has also become more diverse, complex and personal to the individual tourist. For some, the hedonistic consumerist experience of the seaside may suffice; for

others, it may the experience of difference, danger or 'darkness' (Stone and Sharpley 2008) that is significant. Whatever the case, it is evident that the institutionalisation and consumerisation of tourism, far from diluting or simplifying the tourist experience, have rendered it increasingly diverse and complex.

Against this background, the tourist experience has long been the focus of tourism studies, particularly within a sociological framework. Indeed, with the exception of work on the economic benefits of tourism development, much of the early social scientific study of tourism was concerned with explaining and understanding the tourist and the tourist experience from both micro-sociological/phenomenological and a structural perspective. For example, Cohen's early and still much-cited work on tourist typologies (Cohen 1972; 1974; 1979a) established a firm foundation for numerous subsequent models and typologies, whilst the study of tourism demand in general and tourist motivation in particular has remained a dominant theme in the study of tourism. Similarly, issues surrounding the concept of authenticity – a central theme in the study of the tourist experience – have long attracted academic attention (Cohen 1988a; Hughes 1995; Mehmetoglu and Olsen 2003; Wang 1999), whilst commodification, image and perception, the tourist–host relationship and so on have also proved to be popular and fruitful areas of research relevant to the understanding of the tourist experience.

At the same time, broader theories have attempted to locate and explain the tourist experience within the context of the tourist's socio-cultural world. Dean MacCannell's seminal work *The Tourist* (1976 and subsequent editions) proposes that, recognising that they inhabit an anomic, inauthentic socio-cultural world, 'modern' tourists are on a (ultimately unsuccessful or unfulfilling) quest for authenticity, although his specific concept of the tourist as a contemporary secular pilgrim has, perhaps, remained more relevant to the study of the tourist experience, inspiring more recent studies into the spiritual dimensions of tourism (Sharpley 2009). John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990a, 2002) has proved to be equally, if not more, influential in tourism studies, exploring both the evolution, democratisation and postmodern diffusion of tourism and the significance of the visual in the experience of place, although MacCannell and Urry's work is more recently criticised by the grandly self-proclaimed 'new wave' in tourism studies (Franklin 2009). Challenging the traditional 'dualisms' in tourism studies (familiarity/strangerhood; authentic/inauthentic; traditional/modern; sacred/profane; work/pleasure), this seeks to provide a more multidimensional explanation of tourism, focusing very much on the tourist but, at the same time, implying a new 'grand theory' of tourism. However, the fragmentation of work undertaken under the 'new wave' umbrella has prohibited its recognition or acceptance as a cohesive new body of knowledge.

It is not the purpose here to review the tourist experience as the focus of study within tourism; the volume of work is too great, the scope of topics and issues too broad. However, as a general observation, not only has the

study of the tourist experience mostly been concerned with the relationship between tourists and 'their' world as opposed to how tourist experiences are defined by the places, events and peoples that tourists encounter but also, as tourism has continued to expand in both scale and scope, and as tourists' needs and expectations have become more diverse and complex in response to transformations in the dynamic socio-cultural world of tourism, so too have tourist experiences become more diverse and complex. As a consequence, neither earlier works on demand, motivation, and so on, nor broader 'meta-narratives' of tourist behaviour, are able to fully account for emergent motivations, behaviours and responses on the part of tourists. In other words, the need exists for more focused studies into tourist experiences that reflect their ever-increasing diversity and complexity, and their significance and meaning to tourists themselves; that, it, the tourist experience can only be understood by exploring specific contexts within which it occurs, albeit within the conceptual frameworks provided by the existing work referred to above.

The purpose of this book is to do just this. Based upon a number of papers presented at a recent international tourism conference: Tourist Experiences: Meanings, Motivations, Behaviours, hosted by the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK, it explores a number of contemporary themes, representative of current research activity, relevant to the understanding of tourist experiences. Following Ryan's literature-based review of different conceptualisations of the tourist experience, which reveals the complexity and diversity of the topic, the book is then structured around five themes, as follows:

1   *Dark tourism experiences*: the concept of dark tourism has attracted increasing academic and media attention in recent years and is, arguably, one of the most popular contemporary issues within the area of tourist experiences. Of particular importance is the relationship between the experience of 'dark' places and the confrontation of death in contemporary societies.
2   *Experiencing poor places*: Townships, slums, favelas and other poor communities are increasingly becoming packaged and commoditised as tourist attractions, frequently by residents of these 'poor places'. Research into how and why such places are experienced by tourists enhances understanding of how tourism may mediate between poor communities and 'rich' tourists.
3   *Sport tourism experiences*: whilst sporting mega-events have long been associated with tourism, travelling to attend and participate in sports events, or visiting places where such events take place, may have significant meaning beyond the sport for those taking part.
4   *Writing the tourist experience*: information technology and new media have not only transformed how tourists communicate their experiences in time, content and style; they have also added an additional dimension to the tourism experience as 'travel writing' becomes 'travelling writing'.

5   ***Researching tourist experiences: methodological approaches***: as tourist experiences become more diverse and complex, it is necessary to consider innovative and appropriate methodologies for revealing the depth and richness of tourist experiences.

This list is, of course, by no means exhaustive. As already suggested, the tourist experience is as diverse as tourists themselves whilst, given the continuing evolution and expansion of tourism in form, scope and scale, and the emergence of new tourist markets defined both geographically and socio-culturally, the nature and significance of tourist experiences will become yet more complex. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the chapters in this book will contribute to an enhanced understanding of a phenomenon that, in the early twenty-first century, continues to grow in social significance.