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# **SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGES: TRADITIONAL AND HYPERREAL MOTIVATIONS FOR TRAVEL AND TOURISM**

**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Spiritual motivations for travel and tourism are not merely modern phenomena. They have been acculturated in numerous societies since the prehistoric era. They continue to influence the expectations and habits of travelers to this day. Administrators and entrepreneurs of travel and tourism organizations who understand these motivations and who enthusiastically apply them will position themselves better in the growing global and local tourism markets than those who ignore the longstanding human and spiritual traditions for travel.

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a networked service industry for profit, travel and tourism is almost as old as the industrial revolution itself, by some accounts from two hundred-fifty to three hundred years old. However, as a human tradition, travel and tourism is undoubtedly prehistoric in origin. Both the motivations for travel inherited from prehistoric traditions and rituals and the motivations added during the historical period of human

culture are crucial for understanding late modern motivations for travel. These motivations suggest avenues which explain recent trends in travel and tourism as well as to suggest upcoming trends.

## **PREHISTORIC MOTIVATIONS FOR TRAVEL**

Archeological evidence demonstrates that prehistoric peoples migrated regionally if not globally. The lore of numerous cultures recounts epic journeys (5, 6), heroic quests (3) and seasonal celebrations requiring travel (14). The motivations vary as do the late modern accounts of the motivations. The Homeric account is familiar to us as a historic war narrative. Yet at Troy, travel for the war predated the literary intersection of history and prehistory. Furthermore, heroic quests and seasonal celebrations tell us something different and less familiar to ourselves than war.

*Heroic Quests.* Cultures sometimes find themselves in need of help. For whatever reason, food systems fail and scouts need to be sent out to find a new place which is more abundant for habitation. At least, that

is a common sense rationale for migration narratives which tell of an entire community's journey spurred by the heroic quest of an individual or small group. Yet the lore of most ancient peoples also include heroic quests to the otherworld--to the land of the dead, the abode of spirits or the home of the gods. The spiritual need embedded in these kinds of lore should not be glossed over in favor only of material rationales and explanations of prehistoric travel. While famine, plague, pestilence and war indeed must have necessitated life flights of entire communities, it would be wrong to assume that ancient peoples were totally unlike ourselves and never exercised other values in personal and group movement.

Even early in human prehistory our forebears had a more complete view of themselves and the human lot than our late modern assumption that early humans were not much more than animals herding about, driven by their subsistence lifestyle. Sometimes--and "sometimes" frequently appears to mean *on a regular basis*--prehistoric peoples moved about for spiritual and not exclusively material reasons. Human needs were not always fulfilled by bread alone. Certain prehistoric sites in North and South America show signs of well-worn trails to and from their location, much like traditional Aboriginal paths still followed in Australia. We may safely assume that some prehistoric peoples like contemporary Australian Aborigines regularly traveled to special and sacred locations. Sacral artifacts and leavings at North and South American sites bear witness to the similarities (10, 13). While the entire populace of an ancient community probably did not migrate on all occasions, for the paths and sites to have remained after thousands of years, and in some cases to be

used apparently in ways similar to the prehistoric manners, attests to the profound reality that travel was a human tradition at times imbued with spiritual value long before written history supplanted the oral telling of lore.

And what do contemporary Australian Aborigines do? They walk for over three thousand miles, visiting the shrines of spirits. This is what they call a "walkabout" in Dreamtime. Apparently many prehistoric peoples also knew of areas where spirits dwelt and sometimes visited these sacred but natural holy precincts. Some, like shamans alive at this writing, also gathered herbs and special ingredients for healing and for inducing trance along the way to various shrines.

*Seasonal celebrations.* Depending upon the climate of course, certain plants will only flourish seasonally and may not be found in proper condition for medicinal use all year long. On their seasonal journeys then, ancient peoples collected and employed plants with some of the same motivations as contemporary native peoples, namely, for healing. Healing once again may appear to our minds as another material reason for travel among ancient peoples, but that is if we think of healing only from the most narrow of Western senses of medicine. In many ancient and contemporary cultures, the mind or the spirit is ultimately both what needs to be healed and what does the healing. Body is only one ingredient or necessity to consider for a complete cure.

Thus it should come as no surprise that even today, shamans alive in various cultures collect and sometimes ingest heroic doses of hallucinogenic plants (4). The main reason for doing so often involves the shaman's

soul journey--a heroic quest--to the land of the dead or to the spirit world. The purposes of such visions include setting things right with spirits or the solicitation of aid, knowledge or power.

Coupled with the realities of seasonal journey to sacred places, some rites conducted by shamans undoubtedly were regularly performed, not for the healing of anyone in particular, but as part of the ongoing placation of spirits or the ongoing tradition of honoring spirits, particularly the dead. While sometimes a shaman may have practiced some rites alone, the presence of numerous or large sacral remains at ancient sacred places suggests that some honoring and placation was communal. Not only was it communal, it was a celebration.

The human drive to celebrate the living and the dead then is also not so new a phenomenon. Even today many humans celebrate together by ingesting heroic doses of drugs at the end of major travel--like alcohol during spring break in the United States. Thus the prehistoric motivations for travel are alive to this day and include: a) the visitation of spiritual places, b) the acquisition of power plants and substances, including foods and foodways, c) the acquisition of knowledge, d) the celebration of aliveness, togetherness and the dead.

## HISTORIC MOTIVATIONS FOR TRAVEL

Ancient sacred places did not disappear during the historic period only to re-emerge as remote and esoteric archaeological digs. On the contrary, many were transformed as the revealed religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam confiscated the

traditional sites of communal celebration (11, 12). Seasonal and periodic use of the sites continued as they were incorporated into newly explained celebrations. Some sites originally open to the sky were renovated with human-built homes for God, like temples, cathedrals and mosques. The new buildings also were used to celebrate spirituality daily, not just seasonally.

As the dominance of revealed religion grew in certain geographical areas, so too did the pilgrimage to the sites of daily religious celebration. While the spectacle and drama of millions of pilgrims to Mecca during the month of Ramadan is familiar to us as a media soundbyte, let us not forget other pilgrimages like the journey to Bath, England recounted by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* or like that of the ten storytellers in Bocaccio's *DeCameron* (a title which means literally "out of doors" or "outside"). Let us also not forget that pilgrimage is no monopoly of the revealed religions; keep in mind events like the Hindu pilgrimage to the Ganges.

*Experiential Transformation.* Important for our understanding of our contemporary motivations for travel and tourism is the fact that travel as a sacred event in one's life and in the life of one's community continued from the prehistoric and pagan period. Much like the prehistoric experience of sacral travel, something else continued: The pilgrimage is to *do* something to the pilgrim. Call it uplifting, call it a renewal, call it a rebirth, but pilgrimage is supposed to affect the spirit and resolve of the pilgrim positively. Consciously or unconsciously, as an inchoate custom or as a church hierarchy's policy designed to indoctrinate the populace, pilgrimage was and is experienced as a way to improve people, to

better their lot, to enhance their spiritual view of things.

Thus, from prehistory to the present, travel is not merely pragmatic and businesslike. It has been for enjoyment, enrichment, human development, human spirit.

## HYPERREAL MOTIVATIONS

So nowadays, people in many cultures have been acculturated to have profound expectations about travel in general and vacations in particular. These expectations are at the same time as spiritual and personal as they are cultural and social. Even when many people would not call their interest in travel spiritual--based on the narrow notion that the term "spiritual" only applies to church--all the same, many individuals envision at least part of their travel as a heightened experience, qualitatively different from their everyday life. Yet in the crush of business travel in which the main goal for many Westerners is to arrive at a particular place, conduct business and then return home, much has been lost. Visiting local shrines has lapsed into visiting local bars, restaurants, theatres and tourist sites. The kinds of norms prevalent in the North American culture dictate attendance at venues like Disney World at which all the experiences in many ways are artificial (1). However, the expectations about a theme park are still intense with the anticipation of heightened pleasure not found in daily life.

When people go on a vacation, they expect something which to them is neat, whatever that may be. They want to come home with a feeling of having been uplifted, renewed, charged or transformed. While they certainly want to come home with stories to

regale their friends, associates and family, they need a heightened personal experience of something new in order to do so. Realize that these kinds of expectations have been over thousands of years in the making. Fundamentally they are and have been spiritual expectations habituated and socialized since prehistory.

*Hyperreality.* When people move away from their normal and everyday expectations of themselves and others and embrace novel, intense experiences, they move from reality to hyperreality. "Hyperreality" means "beyond the real." People expect certain aspects of their vacations or travel to be beyond the real. They may expect perfection of place, like Disney World with its usually warm climate and its immaculate venues. They may expect perfection of dining like gourmet restaurants. They may expect themselves to be challenged, to learn new things or to better themselves, like during wilderness excursions, attendance at museums or participation in seminars or workshops. Whichever may be the case, they expect something special about their travel--and their ancestors had been acculturated in this expectation for thousands of years. Hyperreal motivations have become commonplace in the sense that the travel and tourism industry is expected to produce similar experiences even for diversely talented and interested clients. This societal expectation is additionally hyperreal in that vacation planners and assistants are expected to help clients replicate essentially the same kind of heightened experience every day of travel. In other words, travel and tourism specialists are expected to replicate novel experiences, on some levels a rather impossible task.

*Liminality.* Vacation professionals may accomplish this Herculean task, either by natural luck and hard work or also by better understanding a human phenomenon called liminality. Liminality is perhaps best expressed in the phrase "betwixt and between" (15, p. 21). If we think of vacation as a time period in which vacationers expect hyperreal experiences, then during the time of the vacation, vacationers are betwixt and between periods of normal, everyday life. Vacationers are in an expectant state. They are not home but on the road. They expect things of themselves and others which they may not expect while they were at home. In other words, they are endowed by cultural practice and personal preference with a role not usually taken upon themselves during regular daily life.

Vacationers live on a rather interesting time line of liminality: During the days or weeks prior to the vacation, they anticipate and fantasize about the actual event of being on vacation. While on vacation, vacationers are not normal--which is painfully evident if they have forgotten some important thing or they experience jet lag or if they accidentally get split up from family or friends during the crush of suddenly new routines and expectations. When they return home, vacationers do not immediately return to normality. They have stories to tell, pictures to share, souvenirs and presents to deliver--as well as unpacking, the wash and the re-establishment of former routines.

On vacation, vacationers are not normal, plain and simple. That means, however, that they are not entirely themselves. They inhabit roles which are temporary and which are designed to deliver a sense of the hyperreal. Roles like being a foreigner create all sorts of novel experiences, some

positive, some maybe not. Roles like that of a learner automatically and willfully puts vacationers in the hands of a mentor who teaches them, hopefully pleasurably.

Additionally, vacationers are presented with ritual occasions during and immediately following the liminality of travel. Rituals include: a) the endowment of liminal status (like leis in Hawaii or crossing the equator on an ocean cruise); b) challenges to liminality (like dealing with interference of home values from the phone, friends or family); c) rites of passage (like being accepted by locals); d) rites of reversal (wearing leisure clothing all day when usually you only "dress for success" or the kids get to determine an activity when usually only the parents do); e) the closure of liminal status (you're back home and a friend, neighbor or supervisor reminds you it's time to get back into the swing of things).

Effective vacation planners then must know more than a little about their clients, their vacation expectations, their ability to accept liminality or their inability or unwillingness to accept liminality. This kind of observation is crucial for the many clients who rely upon vacation planners to place them in vacation packages which meet their true motivational level as well as their stated interest to visit a particular location. Vacation assistants like tour guides and hospitality workers must also be able to recognize when the liminality which occurs for vacationers is too intense or too absent. Vacationers who do not delight in the liminal experiences which come their way need assistance in deflecting or modifying the hyperreality of vacationing. A vacationer who is bored needs assistance in finding hyperreality.

## CURRENT AND UPCOMING TRENDS

Understanding the prehistoric motivations for travel and tourism which still exist today in the forms of hyperreal expectations and liminality goes a long way to explain traditional and current trends as well as upcoming ones. There are a good many people who would describe a terrific vacation as "one that really sends me." When asked to explain what they mean by that, frequently they say they want to go to a place where they can easily find great food, fun people and wonderful experiences. When asked to suggest the kind of place that has "really sent them," most often tropical locales, Disney World and cities with oodles of entertainment venues are mentioned. These kinds of vacation spots might safely be classified as traditional options, the bread and butter of many travel bureaus. These kinds of places have held perennial calling power in North America (2, p. 287-357) and certainly will continue to do so. They are the kind of hyperreal venue that chambers of commerce and businesses pay good money to advertising agencies to promote.

However, much like the greater diversity in magazines, movies and popular music which has emerged since the 1960s, so too during the same time period have diverse hyperreal motivations emerged for travel and tourism. This is a sign of the diversity particularly found in North American cultures--but a diversity not previously tapped so successfully by vacation marketing. Most recently, some vacation entrepreneurs have capitalized upon the prehistoric motivations which still exist for those persons thirsty for spiritual experiences at sacred sites located worldwide. Numerous travel/education packages are promoted, especially for

foreign travel. Call this travel orientation "new age" if you want to, but do not sneer. New age cultures are prehistoric in origin and are not necessarily a fad or fashion which has already peaked. Far from it. Most of the world's population adheres to spiritual beliefs which could be called "new age." Vacation specialists must also not forget that there are plenty of sacred sites as well as wilderness opportunities to be found in almost every state in The United States (12, 9, 7). Overseas travel is not always within the reach of all clients who desire a hyperreal, spiritual experience; there is still plenty of room both for new and practiced vacation entrepreneurs to plan more local packages. Growth possibilities for tour guides as well as cultural interpreters, mentors and facilitators abound.

Self-improvement travel venues have flourished in recent years. Consider the current (and apparently lasting) fitness subculture which has emerged as a multi-billion dollar business in the last few years. Some spas are witnessing a heyday. Sports and fitness are a part of many travelers' plans. Coupled with the new age interests above, many tours include meditation, herbal treatments, organic foods, vegetarian menus and the like. Fitness cruises appear to be a growing niche in the ocean-going market.

*Upcoming Trends.* One media critic already has conceived (pejoratively) of cities as theme parks, most notably, San Francisco (8). Imagine city planners actually highlighting their urban renewals along the lines of theme parks. Presumably this may mean that police at times will become more like security personnel who are more aware of and sensitive to vacationers' celebratory liminality and relaxed public behavior.

Sanitation workers may become public relations attaches who are charged to maintain the hyperreal "look" of a valued tourist location. Tourist venues not currently assigned guides will be assigned friendly spokespersons who are thoroughly knowledgeable about and fans of their assigned venue. While there are already spiritual theme parks like Heritage in Charlotte, North Carolina, it takes little to stretch the imagination to conceive of other kinds of theme parks with fun experiences undergirded by various spiritualities. New age theme parks may become hot tickets for national and international travel. Soon. That's for people who need perhaps a more traditional feel to their main travel destination along with their desire for something new.

However, the overcontrolled nature of most theme parks does not appeal to everyone. Considering that many travel spots, like Negril, Jamaica are fairly free-form in the local lifestyle and activities available to tourists, it is not difficult to imagine theme parks which do not look and feel like theme parks. Consider China as a new age fitness park. The availability of martial arts training, daily Tai Chi instruction, acupuncture, herbal regimen and the like make a place like China an optimal destination for developing market segment interests which are already growing among many travelers.

Undoubtedly there will be an ever increasing licensure and use of wilderness areas worldwide. The world's population grows almost in inverse proportion to the available wilderness areas, areas which are often delicate in their ecological balance. Hence, these areas must be controlled to sustain their habitats. That does not

necessarily mean that all access will be denied nor does it mean that hyperreal wilderness adventures will become almost impossible to come by. What it does mean however is that ecological managers who have been trained almost exclusively in the sciences will have to start thinking about and acting upon human factors. Governments which currently only see capital in the forced exploitation of wilderness areas via mining or other disruptive industries will begin to find vastly increased value in nondisruptive development like travel and tourism. The use of wilderness areas will most certainly be taxed for the revenues and for effective wilderness/habitat management.

Perhaps one of the more stunning trends to expect soon will be the use of virtual reality technologies, both as preparatories for vacations and as substitutes for travel. As preparatories, consider how "the holodeck" on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is frequently employed in various episodes to model situations in unfamiliar terrains. Virtual reality systems may be used to provide pretour information and familiarity, about terrains, customs and language. For vacation venues too expensive for some travelers, virtual reality packages will allow the experience of actual visitation, even for the moon or Mars--somewhat similar to that imagined in the film *Total Recall*. Undoubtedly some clients may begin to explore virtual reality venues instead of actual vacation spots, hence potentially competing with more traditional delivery modes for travel and tourism.

## SUMMARY

Whatever trends the present holds and the future offers, one thing will certainly remain

a constant: People will continue to explore their spiritual needs away from home during travel. Although many travel agents probably do not see themselves as rabbis, ministers, priests, mullahs, gurus or shamans, they are still engaged in activities to uplift, support and enhance people,

activities once almost exclusively relegated to "holy people." As we move into the twenty-first century, new opportunities to serve as spiritual providers will emerge in travel and tourism.

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