

The tourist experience of out-there-ness: theory and practice

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The interest in tourist experiences is crucial for understanding tourism and has resulted in a number of typologies. In this paper, a new typology of tourist experiences is theoretically elaborated and empirically assessed in a variety of socio-spatial settings. A main source of inspiration was Eric Cohen's phenomenology of tourist experiences (Cohen, 1979).

The paper is based on a constructivist perspective on social life. Tourism creates a switch from the self-evident construction of everyday life to a temporarily different state of mind that transforms the experiential world. This transformation is conceived of as the experience of 'out-there-ness', which creates to varying degrees a new and unfamiliar experience of places, people, sounds, smells, different from everyday 'normality' (Schutz 1990, Lengkeek, 1996). We assumed that tourist modes of experiences are not only directly 'lived' during tourist and recreational outings, but also are anticipated and reflected on afterwards. These theoretical considerations formed the foundation of a new typology of tourist experiences. We distinguish between five different modes of experience: amusement (unproblematic ways of having fun); change (temporarily breaking loose from everyday reality in which out-there-ness has still little form); interest (fantasy is created through signs and stories, but out-there-ness is not fully understood); rapture (search for self-identification); and dedication (merge into out-there-ness).

In light of the complexity of the tourist experience, it would be natural to follow a qualitative research methodology. We wanted, however, to compare our results in a variety of socio-spatial settings and to make it work in an efficient and practical way for policy-making, management and design. Therefore, we needed to translate our phenomenological underpinned modes of experience stepwise into categories that are empirical measurable. Inevitably, this operation involves a reduction in the complexity of the phenomena. We developed a questionnaire in which each mode of experience was operationalised in five or six statements. A 5-point Likert scale response format was chosen as the form of measurement for each of the scale items (strongly disagree ↔ strongly agree).

We tested our typology in six different case studies, which vary from day visitors in National Parks in the Netherlands to tourist visiting National Parks in Costa Rica (Elands and Lengkeek, 2000). Factor analysis was applied to determine the underlying dimensions of modes of experiences. This was the basis for assessing the extent to which the factor results of each case study represent the modes of experience. Moreover, we were interested to know the distribution of respondents amongst the different modes of experiences within different socio-spatial settings. Each factor was recalculated based upon the average value of the original scale item values (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree') belonging to that factor. In order to assign respondents to a factor, representing a (component of a) mode of experience, we had to define a boundary value. We decided to set this value on 3.7 (the majority, though not all, of the responses needed to be at level 4 'agree').

To compare the studies with each other, we have tried to integrate all factors of all case studies into a figure (Figure 1). We can conclude that the graphs for all case studies are relatively similar. It is evident that the search for experiences within the context of different studies is universal. It is interesting that the amusement mode, especially in reference to comfort, is the strongest and most obvious in the Veluwe National Landscape tourists study. Perhaps this can be attributed to a

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large group of respondents who chose for a reliable and safe environment nearby, in the Netherlands, and mostly for a short visit. Apart from this, amusement plays a minor role in this study. The change and interest modes form the dominant modes; the interest mode is largest in four studies. It should be noted that shock played a relatively minor role in the mode of rapture. This becomes logical when one reason is that this mode is driven by an explicit fascination for those unexpected and vehement events which are few and far in between. The dedication mode was also small in size. The strongly pronounced change and interest modes coincide with the tourist metaphor as mentioned in the introduction: a more or less shallow experience, mobilized by the desire to 'get out' and an off-hand curiosity.

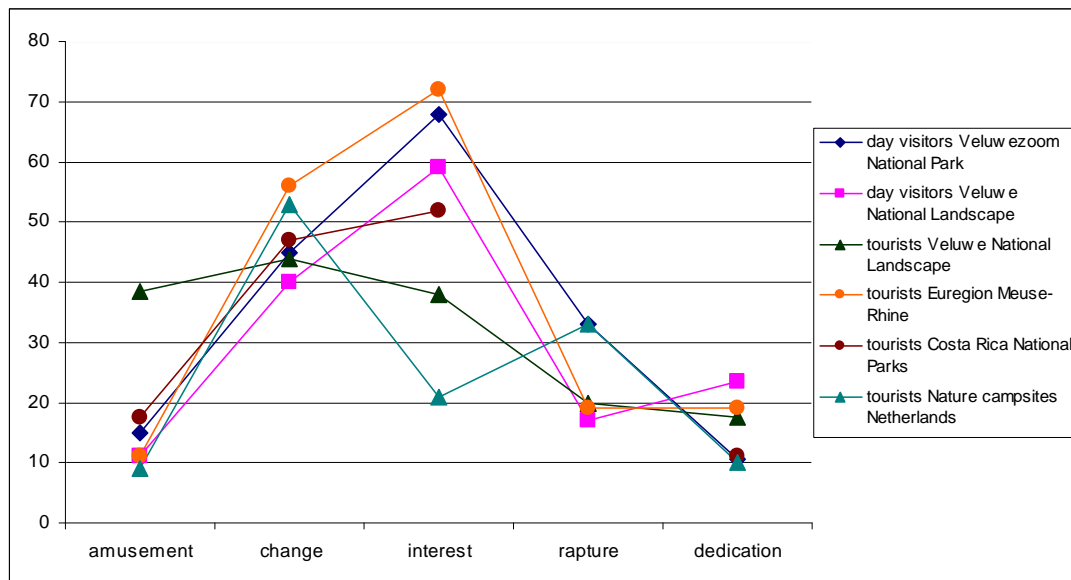


Fig. 1 Distribution of respondents amongst the modes of experience in different socio-spatial settings.

We can conclude that, despite the varied character of the case studies, a large continuity can be observed in appearance and contents of the modes of experience, which has guided us to the formulation of both a self-report questionnaire and recommendations for tourism development. So far, the results have inspired visitor management policies in the Netherlands (Cottrell et al., 2005). Future research will focus especially on the relation between modes of experiences and environmental quality conditions.

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